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RANCH ROMANCES

A CLAYTON MAGAZINE

Liseta of the Range

The Story of a Valiant Heart

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

First June Number

20c

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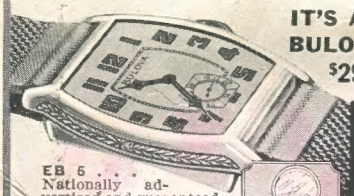

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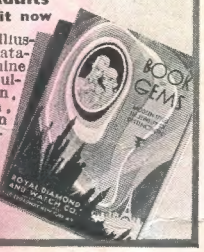

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Liseta of the Range

By Johnston McCulley

This story has all the magic of the real West in its pages—you'll love the feel of the prairie winds that sweep through it, and the sound of creaking saddle leather. It's the story of an hombre with adventure in his blood, and a girl who said she'd rope her man, of a low-down sidewinder who tried to keep them apart—and of love triumphant.

CHAPTER I

Caracol Has an Adventure

WITH his legs stiff and braced like stilts, the pony slid down the fifteen-foot slope to the level bottom of the old arroyo, carrying a small avalanche of gravel and sand along with him—slid with such compulsory and accelerated speed that his fetlocks burned and little pains shot up toward his knees.

As he negotiated this short but hazardous journey, his lowered head was in a cloud of fine dust. So, when he reached the firm footing at the bottom of the slope, he danced away quickly for a short distance, shook his head, and sneezed. Then he drew in a deep, fresh breath, so that his sides heaved, and prepared for a rest.

But the immediate touch of a spur informed the pony that he was to move on at once. That surprised him, and he rather resented it. He felt that he was entitled to a moment of rest after his perilous descent of the slope.

His resentment passed swiftly, however, for he discovered that he had misunderstood. He was being guided deftly toward a tiny stream that gurgled and trickled among the rocks. The water was almost a foot deep at this spot. The pony was allowed to stand in it, cool his burning fetlocks, and drink his fill.

That pleased him immensely. It demonstrated anew that he had a rider who possessed good common sense. With his head upstream, he bent his neck and thrust his muzzle into the cool water. This was to show that a

good pony has sense, too. Had he stood with his head downstream, he would have been drinking water which first had surged around his dirty legs.

Having satisfied his thirst, the pony turned his head and glanced at his rider. There was deep gratitude in his look, and he rather expected a bright smile in return. But he did not get it.

He found that Miss Liseta Kaymore was slouching to one side of her saddle after the manner of a wearied cowpuncher. Her left elbow was braced against the pommel, her forearm was raised, and her saucy chin rested in her cupped left hand. The expression in her face said plainly that her thoughts were on some object far away.

The pony decided that there must be something seriously wrong. For the last two weeks, Liseta Kaymore had not been her usual vivacious and charming self. She did not laugh so much. She did not bend over and "yip, yip!" into the pony's ear and so urge him to a wild, exhilarating dash, as she had used to do so often. Her mind seemed to be always wandering. Sometimes the pony would stray from the trail purposely, just to see what she would do about it, and generally it would be quite some time before she noticed what he was doing and turned him back.

All this had worried Caracol a great deal. That was the pony's name—Caracol. Liseta had given it to him. In Spanish, it meant snail. But it was only a sort of fun name. He was no snail! He could show his heels to any of the Bar K bunch, and he doubted whether there was a horse in Chris Dattock's big Double Box outfit that could beat him.

At first, Caracol had entertained the opinion that Liseta was in love and mooning over some man. But he finally decided that was not the truth. In such case, wouldn't he have known all about it? He would have been right there to see and hear. Whenever a girl of the range grew interested in a man in that way, there were always long rides, with two ponies going slowly side by side while their riders talked nonsense in low tones.

Perhaps it was business, Caracol thought, that was worrying Liseta. He had sensed lately that all was not well with the Bar K outfit. Some of his close pony friends had been sold recently to other outfits. And the hard feed was getting scarce; Caracol knew that from the small and infrequent rations. Nor were there as many beef critters around the Bar K as there had been. And the calf pasture was almost empty; and when a stockman was compelled to market veal, it meant that he needed money badly.

There was also something about Liseta's younger brother, Bobby. Caracol knew that Liseta had been crying about him a great deal, and old Sam Kaymore, her father, one of the pioneers of the district, wasn't the man he had been formerly. Caracol had noticed a gradual change in him, and it had been a change for the worst. It had started a few months before, right after Liseta's mother had died.

But Caracol ceased thinking of these things and stepped daintily out of the creek and went for a few feet along the bed of the arroyo. The movement seemed to arouse his rider. Liseta gathered up the reins and touched with the spurs, and they traveled along the bed of the ancient watercourse until they came to a place where Caracol could climb up the other side.

Caracol wondered why Liseta had come to this part of the range. Over this way was Double Box land. The big Double Box was high class and tony on account of its wealth, and inclined to look down on smaller outfits. The Bar K crowd were only humble folk.

Chris Dattock had bought over the Double Box about four years before, and had made a great outfit out of it. He was a big man, arrogant and overbearing, and under his command he had a wild crew of cowpunchers and vaqueros headed by a certain Bill

Garch, regarding whom dark deeds were rumored. Chris Dattock was a bachelor. There was no woman at the Double Box. Dattock was master of his tough crew by right of might.

But all this was none of his business, Caracol told himself. He ceased thinking about it as he made his way cautiously up a gravel slope and came to the level of the mesa, and there Liseta brought him to a stop again. Caracol knew, from the feel of the saddle, that she was standing in the stirrups and surveying the terrain.

The pony sniffed suddenly. He could smell smoke, and also another odor he knew well. In the distance, a calf bawled. Some calf was being thrown and branded, and was putting up a raucous protest about it. But that was also Double Box business, Caracol told himself.

The touch of a spur sent him on again. At a leisurely rate of speed, Liseta Kaymore was following the arroyo, circling back toward the home ranch. Caracol sensed that she had ridden this far to be away from her usual surroundings, to get away and think on whatever problems were bothering her.

Now it seemed that they were going home. Caracol was rather glad of that, because the day was hot and sticky, and there was not a breath of breeze stirring. When they got home, he would be turned into the corral, and could roll in the dirt, and scratch his back against one of the corral posts.

Then he felt the spurs rip suddenly and unexpectedly against his flanks. It startled him more than it pained, for it was unusual. He felt firm hands on the reins, and heard a soft command for speed. Caracol picked his own trail and did his best. He did not know the reason for this sudden activity, and did not care, since they were going in the general direction of home.

A wild shout sounded in the distance. From the corner of one eye, Caracol beheld three horsemen bearing down upon him at a terrific rate of speed. He swerved in obedience to a touch on the rein. He guessed that Liseta was trying to avoid these horsemen.

That was all Caracol needed to know. If this was a game of some sort, he would enter into it willingly and with the proper spirit. Perhaps a game would lighten the heart of his downcast mistress.

And then he heard her voice again: "Caracol! Hurry, Caracol! Yip, yip!"

Caracol decided in that instant that it was not a game, for in the voice of his mistress there was a note he seldom heard, but which he understood at once—the note of fear. He felt called upon to do his best, and he did it. He tore on at great speed toward the lip of a little gulch, spurning the ground with his hooves. He found that he could not jump the gulch, so he swerved again. How was Caracol to know that when he lurched to one side to save his rider and himself, he'd made a maneuver that led to disaster?

For he turned directly toward two of the pursuing horsemen. Two other cow-ponies suddenly crowded him. There was a minor collision. A gun cracked once, and he knew that Liseta had fired. A man gave a yelp of pain. A rope swished through the air over Caracol's head, and the pony heard Liseta give a little cry as her gun was wrenched from her hand.

Caracol struggled a little to go on, but found he could not. A pony was pressing on either side of him, and another was standing just in front, blocking the way, all of them with heaving sides. A man reached out and grasped the reins and jerked cruelly, so that the bit hurt Caracol's mouth.

"Let me go!" he heard Liseta Kaymore crying angrily at somebody.

CHAPTER II

Fixin' for a Weddin'

TWO of the men were Mexican vaqueros, and the third was Bill Garch, of the Double Box outfit. The

vaqueros were Double Box riders also. All were mean of dress and evil of visage, with alcoholic breaths and mustaches stained with tobacco juice.

"I reckon you'll have to pardon us, Miss Kaymore, for usin' a rope on you," Bill Garch was saying. "If I hadn't, you might have hurt some of us bad. You nicked Carlos in the shoulder, the way it was."

"If you dare put a hand on me—" Liseta began.

"There!" Bill Garch interrupted. "I just knew that there was a misunderstandin' o' some sort. We don't aim to hurt you, Miss Kaymore."

"You took after me—"

"Sure and certain! We had our orders to hail you if we happened to cut your trail, and when we saw you we just started to ride up. Nothin' for you to get scared about."

"She devil!" the man Carlos muttered.

Bill Garch laughed. "Carlos don't like that bullet in his shoulder," he said. "But he ain't hurt bad. Lucky you didn't plug him in the head or heart."

"If there's been a mistake, I'm sorry," Liseta told him. "But you came riding at me, and I didn't know you. I can see from the brands on your horses that you're Double Box men."

"Yes'm! I'm Bill Garch. Maybe you've heard tell o' me."

"I have," Liseta replied. There was no compliment in her way of speaking.

Bill Garch grinned at her. "I reckon my reputation ain't o' the best," he boasted. "But I'm just a hard hombre, a tough cowpuncher who ain't had the benefits o' the refinin' influence o' women. All the women I've knowed didn't have any refinin' influence or anything else refinin'."

"Why did you overhaul me?" Liseta demanded.

"Oh, yeah! Pardon me for not statin' that sooner, but you opened fire on us and flustered us up some. Mr. Dattock said to watch for you to-day, him knowin' that you often come for rides over this way, and us bein' down in that coulee brandin' calves. He wants to see you, miss."

"He knows the trail to the Bar K, doesn't he? What does he want to see me about?"

Bill Garch grinned again and looked a trifle embarrassed. "Near as I c'n make out, Miss Kaymore, he wants to see you regardin' a weddin'."

"A wedding!" Liseta gasped.

"Yes'm. He was remarkin' that you were the only woman hereabouts o' the right kind, and that you'd probably know all about such triflin' things as weddin's. He yearns for a lot of information, I reckon."

"Are you trying to tell me that Chris Dattock is going to be married?"

"I reckon that's what is in his mind," Bill Garch replied. "Surprisin', ain't it? He's had the chink cook clean up the house and put some fancy lace curtains at the windows, and done a lot o' stuff like that. And there's a preacher comin' out from Mesaburg—due any time now."

"But who's the bride?"

"I don't just know, miss," Bill Garch replied. "Mr. Dattock didn't tell me everything. I just gathered that there was goin' to be a weddin', and that he yearned to ask you a lot of advice about it."

"Why, I—I'll help in any way I can," Liseta said.

"That's right handsome o' you, Miss Kaymore. If you'll ride along with us—"

"That isn't necessary," she interrupted. "You can tell Mr. Dattock to ride over to the Bar K this evening."

"Yeah, but I've got my orders to take you to him as soon as possible."

"You have? It just happens, Mr. Bill Garch, that I'm not taking orders from Mr. Dattock."

"But he's right down there at the end o' the coulee, ma'am. You c'n see the smoke o' the brandin' fire from here. I reckon, Miss Kaymore, that you're afraid of us. You needn't be. Let's ride!"

Liseta did not like the manner of Bill Garch and the two men with him. She wished that she had her gun, and that they would take away the lariat that held her arms to her sides.

That marriage tale did not quite ring true with her. As far as Liseta knew, there was no marriageable woman in the district who might be seriously interested in Chris Dattock. And if a strange woman had come to the local range to marry him, she would have heard of it. One of the Bar K punchers had been in town the night before, and had ridden out that morning. He had said nothing about a strange woman being in town.

"I reckon you've got to go along with us," Bill Garch was saying. "I've got my orders, and if I didn't take you back to Mr. Dattock he might do somethin' terrible to me."

"Then I'm a prisoner?"

"No, ma'am! I wouldn't want you to look at it that way at all, Miss Kaymore. You're to be treated with every respect. I'll keep your gun, though, so you won't shoot any of us up, and we'll keep that rope where it is for the time bein'. Soon as we get to Mr. Dattock, and you see it's all right and no harm intended, we'll take off the rope, and give you back your gun. Let's ride!"

Liseta protested again, but it availed her nothing. Caracol was led by one of the vaqueros, the wounded Carlos rode behind and kept the lariat taut, and Bill Garch rode alongside and watched Liseta carefully.

"You'll be sorry for this!" Liseta cried.

"I'm only obeyin' orders, ma'am," Garch said. "If you've got any complaint, you want to tell Mr. Dattock about it."

"I'll tell him plenty!" Liseta threatened.

They rode slowly along the rim of the coulee, and after a time they could see the branding operations, could see Chris Dattock in the saddle on his big white horse, and half a dozen men.

Chris Dattock turned his head and saw them approaching. He spoke to his men, and they released a branded calf and began extinguishing the fire. Then they mounted and hurried away, only a couple remaining behind.

Liseta's face was flaming and her eyes were blazing with rage as they rode up to the master of the Double Box and stopped before him.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr. Dattock?" Liseta demanded.

"Now, Liseta, I'm right down sorry if my men frightened you," Chris Dattock said. "I don't want that you should be angry at me, either. I was just awful busy, and I told Garch to fetch you to me, if he saw you on the range."

"If you wanted to ask me about something, couldn't you ride over to the Bar K like a gentleman?"

"Now, Liseta! You're right down pretty when you're mad," Dattock said, grinning. "You've just got to have pity on me, Liseta. I'm an old bachelor, and I'm fixin' to get married. It takes a woman to engineer a weddin' right. You ought to be proud to do it, helpin' out your sex. Women are always glad when one o' their number hooks a man, ain't they?"

"Who're you going to marry?" she asked.

"That's to be a great surprise," Dattock answered. "Now, don't you go to thinkin' that it's that blond restaurant waitress in Mesaburg! You'll be surprised when you see her. Let's ride on to the house."

"I've got to be getting home."

"It won't take long, Liseta. And I'm in a hurry."

"When are you going to be married?"

"Preacher's on his way out here now. I don't reckon you know him. Newcomer in the district—Reverend David Bencher."

"Is the bride at your house?"

Dattock laughed lightly. "Now you're gettin' curious about her," he said. "Let's be gettin' on!"

Liseta hesitated a moment. But it seemed all right. Chris Dattock would not dare offer her insult or harm, she told herself. And Liseta grew a bit excited at thought of a wedding, and her curiosity was aroused regarding the bride.

Weddings were scarce on this sparsely settled range, tucked away down near the Mexican border. There was a dearth of eligible women, and it was a rough country. Liseta's own mother had come there as a bride, to help her husband found a home, but nowadays the women were inclined to hold back and let the men do all the pioneering.

So she rode on with them. The rope was taken away, but they had neglected to return her gun. She asked for it, and Bill Garch apologized and handed it to her immediately, and she slipped it into its holster.

It was only a short distance to the ranch house of the Double Box. Liseta had not been there for a couple of years. As they neared it, she noticed the improvements Chris Dattock had made in the property. A little lump came into her throat at thought of his evident success as compared to her own father's failure.

Dattock maintained a conversation about range topics. They galloped down a lane and dismounted in front of the house. Dattock helped Liseta up the steps in a gallant manner.

"There's a lot o' things I want to ask you about," Dattock was saying. "I'm goin' to send clear to the city for some new furniture."

Liseta glanced around the living room. It was large, poorly furnished at present, and there was distinctly a masculine air about it, but it was clean, thanks to the Chinese cook. Lace curtains, stiff with newness, had been put at the windows by somebody who did not know how to hang them.

"Just flop in a chair," Chris Dattock invited.

Liseta flopped. It was cool in this big room, and the chair was comfortable. Chris Dattock stood a few feet in front of her, his fists planted against his hips, grinning as he looked down at her. He was a huge man, dressed in a slovenly fashion. To Liseta there was something repulsive about him. Now his direct gaze made her nervous.

"You've forgotten to tell me the bride's name," she said.

"Can't you guess?"

"If it isn't the blond waitress, I haven't any idea."

Chris Dattock laughed. "Then you'd sure better get the right idea quick, Liseta," he said. "The bride is goin' to be you!"

CHAPTER III

The Bride-Elect

THERE was silence in the big living room of the Double Box ranch house for a moment, except for the heavy breathing of Chris Dattock. Then the silence was shattered by Liseta Kaymore's silvery laughter. It was the first time she had laughed so in weeks—a ringing, musical laugh of delight.

There were tears in her eyes when she finally ceased and looked up at Chris Dattock, but they were tears of enjoyment. She struggled to get her breathing back to normal, gasped, fought for coherent speech. Dattock stood before her, silent and waiting.

"You—you say that I am to be the bride?" Liseta finally managed to ask.

"Yeah, you're to be the bride," Dattock informed her again. "I didn't think you'd go into a fit of hysterics when I told you. Overjoyed, I reckon?"

"Please let me be sure that I understand this," she begged. "Is this a proposal of marriage you're making me?"

"Well, if you want to call it that."

"It's the very first one that I've ever had," Liseta said. "I've always imagined how it was done, but I never thought it would be anything like this. If this is love-making, it sure doesn't amount to much."

"No?" Dattock said. "Well, I ain't a cussed young fool to moon around and

talk a lot o' mush. I've got the mind of a man, I hope. When I want a thing, I make plans to get it—and I always do get it!"

"This is one time you're fooled. You don't get me, Mr. Dattock!"

"No?" he asked, nastily.

"No, sir! I'm declining your offer with thanks. I'm not eager to be the mistress of the Double Box outfit. When I see the man I want for a husband, Mr. Dattock, I'll simply uncoil my lariat and rope him. But I haven't seen him yet."

"I was thinkin' you had good, sound sense," Dattock complained. "But that's too much to expect in any woman, I s'pose. I decided to get married, and you're the only eligible young female hereabouts, so I picked you out. I made all the arrangements, and told the boys to nab you and fetch you in."

"Why, you—you beast!" she cried at him, springing to her feet. "Rope me like a maverick and put your brand on me—as easy as that!"

"You ought to have some sense, Liseta. I'm rich already, and I aim to be a heap richer. And you—well, everybody knows that the old Bar K is on its last legs. Your brother Bobby ain't nothin' but a gamblin' young wastrel, and your old man is tryin' to drink himself to death."

"You beast!" Liseta cried again. "How dare you talk to me that way?"

"Yeah, and why not? It's the truth, and you danged well know it! Looks to me like you're gettin' a lot the best o' the bargain. Your old man—"

"Don't you dare say another word against my father! You don't understand."

"Easy enough to understand a man who's wallowin' in liquor."

"My mother died a few months ago," Liseta told him. "You know that. She and my dad had been pals since childhood. And her death—well, it broke him up. That's the reason he drinks. I've tried to get him to stop."

"Too late for that, I reckon," Dattock commented.

"It's never too late! And Bobby—he wouldn't be running wild if Mother hadn't died. He was her baby, and he misses her so. But you needn't worry, Mr. Chris Dattock. The Bar K will come through, all right. We won't need your help."

"Then you won't marry me?"

"I'd die first!" Liseta said.

"You know, I just had a sneakin' idea you might look at it that way," Dattock confessed.

"Thanks for that much!"

"So I went right ahead and made some more plans, to be used if you didn't show sense."

"What do you mean?" Liseta asked.

"I just made some plans to marry you whether you wanted to get married to me or not. I went to the county seat and got the marriage license. Then I got hold o' that preacher, David Bencher, and told him to come out to the ranch. He ought to be here almost any minute."

"But I won't marry you!" she stormed. "You've had all your trouble for nothing. I never heard of such a thing. Your preacher can turn around and ride back to town, as far as I'm concerned."

"Oh, you'll marry me, I reckon. Dave Bencher will mumble the words."

"No preacher would marry a girl when she didn't want to be married."

"This one will. Dave Bencher is under obligations to me, and he'll do as I say. He's a newcomer here. He'll marry us whether you like it or not."

"What would be the sense in that?" she asked. "I'd go right home and tell Dad, and he'd ride in to the county seat and tell the folks there, and—"

"No, you won't," Dattock interrupted. "I've got this all planned, so you might as well stop actin' up and agree. My boys will say that we've been meetin' out on the range and sweetheartin', and Dave Bencher will swear you were a willin' bride."

"You can't do it! You must be insane to think you can."

"Why can't I do it? There's nobody

around here to help you. Bencher will sign the certificate. Then you'll be my wife, and you'll behave then! Might as well agree without fussin'."

Liseta backed away and looked at him squarely. No, there was no indication of insanity in his face. He actually meant what he had said. He had trapped her. There would be a wedding whether she agreed or not.

As Chris Dattock laughed mockingly at what he thought was her fear, strength and courage returned to her. She started toward him again.

"Get out of my way!" she cried.

"Where do you aim to go?"

"I'm going home as fast as my pony can take me. I'm going to tell my dad about this crazy idea of yours. I'll let the whole range know about it."

"You ain't goin' any place," Dattock told her. "You're goin' to stay right here and be married."

"You get out of my way and let me go!" she cried. "Wait till the men of the range hear about this!"

"Oh, they won't do anything about it. You'll be my wife by that time, and they won't have any right to interfere. Everybody around here will swear you were a willin' bride. Them men o' the range will hesitate some, I reckon, before lockin' horns with me and my Double Box outfit. You get back there and behave, now, or I'll pick you up and carry you!"

Liseta whipped her gun out of its holster and menaced him with it.

"Stand aside!" she ordered. "I'm not fooling, now. If you don't stand aside—"

In the face of her threat, Chris Dattock only laughed loudly and lurched toward her, his hands extended as though to grasp her. Liseta had no wish to shoot the man, but she would not hesitate to defend herself if pressed to do it. She cried another warning at him, but he only laughed again and went on toward her. So she threw up the gun and pulled the trigger.

There was no spurt of flame, no puff of pungent smoke, no loud report. Chris Dattock did not reel back with a bullet in his breast, as Liseta had expected, nor did he show the slightest symptoms of fear. Liseta pulled the trigger repeatedly, and there came to her ears only a series of little clicks which told her that the weapon she held was useless.

Dattock laughed at her. "Bill Garch took the cartridges out o' that gun before he gave it back to you," he explained. "Think that I'd be fool enough to let you have a full gun to play with? Now you'd better understand that you got to do as I say. You just better cool down some and get into the right frame o' mind for a weddin'."

She struck at him wildly with the empty gun, and missed. Dattock tore the weapon from her grasp. Liseta dashed to the nearest table, searching frantically for something she could use as a weapon. Before she could accomplish her purpose, he grasped her again, held her close while she kicked and struck and shrieked angrily at him. Presently she grew tired, exhausted, and he held her at arm's length away and leered down at her.

"Might as well be quiet about it," he said. "Bein' my wife won't be such a bad job. You ought to be glad of it! And don't worry any about your old man and that kid brother o' yours. I'll see that they get along all right."

Liseta had a lot of spunk, and an abundance of genuine courage to back it up, but after all she was only a girl in a situation where she could not fight with any hope of success. Suddenly a gush of tears came to the relief of her strained nerves. She collapsed in the nearest chair and gave away to a tempest of sobs. Chris Dattock looked down at her, grew uncomfortable, and then angry.

"Stop your cussed cryin'!" he ordered. "There ain't anything for you to cry about. I'll put you in the next room till the preacher gets here. There ain't but one window, and I had slats nailed across that, so you can't get out.

You see, I've thought of everything."

Before she could guess what move he intended making next, he had stooped and lifted her as though she were a child. He strode across the room and kicked open a door, carried her into a small bedroom adjoining, and dumped her unceremoniously upon the bed. He hurled her empty, useless six-gun against the nearest wall. Then he strode back to the door.

"No more o' your cussed nonsense, now!" he said, in a voice of authority. "I've had enough of it. You stay right there. I've got a lot o' things to do—seein' about the stuff for the weddin' supper, and gettin' out some liquor for the boys."

As he started to turn away, Bill Garch came hurrying into the big room.

"The preacher's come, Boss!" he announced.

CHAPTER IV

The Preacher

CHRIS DATTOCK locked the door of the small bedroom and put the key into his pocket. Then he hurried across the living room and followed Bill Garch through the front door and out upon the wide veranda of the ranch house.

A rider had come leisurely down the lane from the distant road, and was now at the bottom of the steps, slouched to one side of the saddle and inspecting the place.

Chris Dattock gave him a look of surprise and then one of keen appraisal. He was tall and rather thin, and he wore a long black coat and a black hat. Moreover, he had on a white shirt and collar. The shoulders of the coat were covered with powdered trail dust, and the white collar had been wilted by the blazing sun.

"Who are you?" Dattock demanded.

"Me? The name's Mart Morlen, but I reckon that it don't mean anything to you. I'm lookin' for Chris Dattock, o' the Double Box outfit."

"I'm Dattock. What's wanted?"

"Near as I c'n make out, I came here to engineer a weddin' ceremony," Mart Morlen replied. "The trail has been both long and dusty, brother, but if this here is the Double Box, I've finally arrived."

"I never saw you before," Dattock said.

"You ain't a bit worse off than thousands and thousands of other gents who ain't ever seen me either," Morlen told him. "But it's my fault as much as yours, I reckon. I've been wanderin' around considerable all my life."

"Who sent you here?"

"It's just an accident that I'm here, Brother Dattock. I mean, I'm here 'cause of an accident. That's the best way to put it."

"Maybe you'd better do some right quick explainin'. We don't take a fancy here to jaspers who don't state their business pronto."

"Oh, you needn't be scared o' me, Brother Dattock! I don't aim to climb your frame, seein' as how it's a right sturdy frame. I just understood that you yearned to get married, and so I hustled along."

"Yeah, but another man was to do that job for me. So where do you come in?"

"I know. Dave Bencher. It happens that Brother Bencher can't be with you to officiate on this here happy occasion. As you probably know danged well, Brother Bencher is a lot better gambler than he is a preacher. But even the best o' gamblers make their little mistakes. Brother Bencher made one, which is why he can't be here."

"What was it?" Dattock asked.

"It was like this—Brother Bencher was engaged in playin' a gamblin' game called draw poker, o' which you may have heard some time or other. Four gents were playin' with him, and one o' them happened to be an inquisitive hombre."

"Yeah?" Dattock questioned.

"Yeah! It seems that Brother Bencher laid down a hand containin'

four kings, and this here inquisitive hombre happened to have a king in his own hand at the time."

"Careless," Dattock commented.

"I betcha! Any respectable pack o' cards, as maybe you're aware, ain't got but four kings in it, and there was five right in plain sight on the table. It seems that, when this here inquisitive hombre asked a few questions about it, Brother Bencher couldn't answer 'em quick enough."

"What happened?" Dattock asked.

"You might know. Brother Bencher was just a mite slow on the draw. The inquisitive cuss tossed a slug of hot lead right quick-like, and it went straight into the anatomy o' Brother Bencher, discommodin' him considerable."

"Kill him?"

"Nope! He'll be up and around again after some careful doctorin' and nursin'. But he wasn't able to get out here for the weddin'. So he delegated me to come out in his place, not wantin' you to be disappointed."

Mart Morlen thereupon grinned and got down out of his saddle. When he stretched to remove saddle cramp, he seemed to be a trifle more than six feet tall. He had wide shoulders and lean hips, and his legs were shaped like those of a veteran cowpuncher. There was a capable look about him. But his face was stamped with an expression of innocence.

"Are you a preacher?" Dattock demanded.

"Well, I'm as much a preacher as Brother Bencher," Morlen replied. "Him and me were ordained the same day, but I don't recollect just when."

Morlen grinned and winked as he finished speaking, and Bill Garch indulged in a burst of raucous laughter.

"Be quiet, you fool!" Dattock hissed at him. "I don't want the girl to know that this here is goin' to be a fake weddin'."

"Why, Mr. Dattock!" Morlen exclaimed. "You don't mean that you'd fool the girl, do you?"

Chris Dattock's eyes suddenly grew narrow as he advanced toward the newcomer.

"How do I know you're tellin' me the truth about this?" he asked.

"Pardon me! My mistake!" Morlen said. "I've got a letter for you from Brother Bencher. Got interested talkin' and forgot it. Here it is."

He handed a note to Dattock, and the latter opened it and read swiftly:

> Dear Dattock:
>
> Mart Morlen will hand you this and explain what's happened to me, and he'll do the work as well as I could. He's a friend of mine.

The note was signed with David Bencher's name. It seemed all right to Dattock.

"Are you right sure you understand the situation?" Dattock asked.

"Sure and certain! Brother Bencher explained everything to me. You c'n just tell the girl that he couldn't get here, and that I'm a new preacher from the county seat. And now, if that's all settled, let me remark again that the trail had been long and hot and dusty, and my throat needs washin' out."

"Mean to stand there and tell me that a preacher'd take a drink?"

"Way I feel now, I'd sure take one if one wasn't given to me," Morlen replied.

"We'll go around to the kitchen."

Dattock led the way, with Mart Morlen and Bill Garch following side by side. They entered the kitchen through a side door and sat at a table there, which caused the busy Chinese cook to growl maledictions in his own language. Dattock produced bottle and glasses, and they drank.

"You got the girl here yet?" Morlen asked.

"Yeah! Locked up in one o' the rooms."

"Locked up, huh? That sounds like she ain't yearnin' much to rush into your arms."

"She's fussin' about it some," Dattock admitted.

"Yeah? Girls don't know their own minds half the time. I'll give her a talkin' to pretty soon. I'll grow right eloquent about what a fine thing it'll be for her to be Mrs. Chris Dattock. I'll paint her future in glowin' colors."

"That might help some," Dattock admitted. "She's been cryin' a little, too."

"That ain't nothin' to worry about. Some girls get a heap of enjoyment out o' cryin'," Morlen replied. "What's the girl's name?"

If Chris Dattock had entertained any suspicions that Morlen was a knight come to the rescue, that remark dispelled them.

"Her name is Liseta Kaymore," he replied. "Her father, Sam Kaymore, owns the Bar K outfit, near here. It ain't much of an outfit—all run down."

"Sam Kaymore? I've heard tell of him. He was a good man once. When you aim to get married?"

"In an hour or so. Soon as the boys get cleaned up a bit after doin' the early evenin' chores. Then we'll have a weddin' supper. You know enough o' the ceremony to get along?"

Mart Morlen grinned again. "Yeah! I've got a little black book with it in," he replied, exhibiting the volume. "Brother Bencher gave it to me. Don't know where he got hold of it. Don't you worry any about me doin' my part, Brother Dattock. I'll make it downright impressive, too. She'll remember it as long as she lives."

Morlen helped himself to another drink without invitation.

"I've got to shave," Dattock said, "and put on my new boots."

"That's right, Brother Dattock! Go and deck yourself for the bridal. Shave off your whiskers and grease your boots. Maybe I'd better go in and prepare the bride now."

"Come along!" Dattock said.

Dattock got up and led the way through a short hall and into the living room. Bill Garch went outside to give some necessary orders to the men about the evening chores.

"Be careful what you say," Dattock whispered to Morlen, as they neared the door of the room wherein Liseta Kaymore was a prisoner.

"Don't worry any, Brother Dattock. Just leave me alone with the girl, and I'll give her a talkin' to. By the time you get shaved and change your boots, we'll be ready. I sure hope you have a good weddin' supper, 'cause I'm goin' to be hungry."

"You'll be fed plenty," Dattock told him. "That much o' you is like a preacher, anyhow. A preacher is always ready to eat."

Dattock unlocked the door of the small bedroom and opened it, leaving the key in the lock. Liseta was sitting on the side of the bed when they entered, and sprang to her feet when she saw them.

"This here is the preacher, Liseta," Dattock said. He backed out of the room, leaving the door about halfway open.

"The name's Morlen, miss," the newcomer to the Double Box informed Liseta. "Brother Bencher wasn't able to come, so I'm here in his place. Thought that I'd better have a few words with you before the ceremony."

"Are you a preacher?" Liseta cried. "Then you can help me. All this is a trick. I don't want to be married to anybody, and least of all to Chris Dattock. His men caught me out on the range, and brought me here a prisoner. Help me get away!"

"Now, now, Miss Kaymore!" Morlen said, in soothing tones. "I reckon you don't quite realize what you're sayin'. I'm right sure Brother Dattock wouldn't do anything like that. You'll soon have a lovin' husband—"

"Can't you understand?" she cried in interruption. "I don't want to be married. I won't be married! How can you marry me, then? I won't answer the questions!"

"But I've got right keen ears, Sister Kaymore. I'll ask them questions, and I'm sure that I'll hear you answer 'em right. Yeah, I'm right sure of it!"

"So, you're in the plot, too!" she

cried at him. "A fine preacher you are! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Let me tell you that you'll suffer if you do this!"

"Nothin' ever scares me much, not even threats," Mart Morlen observed. "You just sit right down there, and we'll have a little friendly talk. I reckon that I c'n show you the error o' your ways. You're a mighty lucky girl, seems to me, gettin' a fine man like Chris Dattock for a husband. Just think o' this big ranch he owns!"

"I wouldn't care if he owned the whole state! I hate him!" she cried. "I don't want to marry anybody! I—I want to go home!"

Then the tears came again, despite her fight to keep them back. Mart Morlen had advanced into the room, and had come to a stop in front of a little table. The table was bare and covered with a film of dust. It was an example of the sort of housekeeping they had at the Double Box Ranch.

"This here place sure needs a woman," Morlen said. "It needs the touch of a woman's hand, as the sayin' is, and the hand ought to be holdin' a dust cloth. Look at the dust on the table! You'd be doin' a great service to take charge o' this house and clean it up."

"I've got my dad's house to take care of, and I don't want any more," Liseta said.

Chris Dattock had been listening to all this on the other side of the door. They could hear his boots creak as he moved slightly. Morlen grinned at that. Evidently Dattock was not sure of him yet.

"Yeah, it's an awful state this house is in," Morlen continued. "I'm right sure you won't stand for dust like this when you're Mrs. Dattock."

As he finished speaking, Liseta happened to look up and meet his eyes squarely, and she thought there was a peculiar expression around them. Morlen glanced down at the table, up at her again, and then at the table once more. Liseta looked down—and gasped.

With his forefinger, Mart Morlen had marked in the dust on the top of the table. What he had marked was her father's brand—a Bar K!

CHAPTER V

Unexpected Help

WHEN Liseta had dismounted to enter the Double Box ranch house, Caracol had been left standing with reins trailing. One of the Double Box men had taken Chris Dattock's mount away, but Caracol had been neglected because no specific orders had been issued regarding him.

So he waited there patiently for a time, switching his tail at the flies which tormented him, and suffering because of the heat. Presently he moved away a few feet, and finally he did what any sensible pony would have done under the circumstances—wandered around the end of the veranda and to the side of the house, where there was some shade.

Caracol found himself standing near a window, and he looked through it and into a room. He could see his mistress sitting on the edge of a bed, sobbing. Caracol wondered what new trouble had come to her and why she did not come out of the house and go home where she belonged.

But she stopped crying after a time. She brushed away her tears, and seemed to grow rather determined about something. But she remained sitting there on the side of the bed.

Caracol's attention was distracted at that moment by the arrival of Mart Morlen, and presently Morlen's horse came around the corner of the building also, seeking the shade. Caracol made no advances. He did not recognize the brand the other horse wore, and Caracol was always a bit timid about mixing with strangers. Moreover, he was interested anew in what was happening inside the room.

When Liseta saw that Bar K brand marked on the dusty table, traced there by Mart Morlen's forefinger, she

flashed Morlen a swift look, and caught his frown of warning just in time to make her hold back an excited speech. Hope came to her. She knew that Chris Dattock was standing on the other side of the half-opened door, and so she tried to act a part.

"There won't be any wedding!" she stormed. "You can't marry a girl when she won't give her consent. I'll have you run off the range for this!"

"Oh, there'll be a weddin', all right!" Mart Morlen assured her. "I c'n fill out the certificate and file it at the county seat all very neat and proper. Brother Dattock's cowpunchers will do for witnesses. Everybody will know that you're married—no question o' that."

Liseta resumed her seat on the edge of the bed when he motioned for her to do so, and pretended to sob again. Morlen moved slowly around the room, inspecting it, glancing at her frequently as he did so. He finally stopped at the door, to find Dattock standing on the other side of it.

"She'll be easy enough to handle when the time for the ceremony comes," Morlen whispered to Dattock. "You c'n go ahead and shave. I'll keep right on talkin' to her. By time you get shaved, I'll have her talked into a trance."

He grinned at Dattock, and pulled the door almost shut as he turned away, then went back toward the bed as Dattock hurried to another room.

"Who are you?" Liseta whispered.

"Careful! Ain't got time to go into that now. I'm here to help you out o' this."

"Yes, get me out of here," she begged. "Please get me out and take me home."

"Yes'm. There may be a little ruckus about doin' it, but I reckon it c'n be done. Is that your gun over there by the wall on the floor?"

"Yes—empty," she whispered.

Morlen winked at her by way of warning, and then lifted his voice for the benefit of anybody who might be listening on the other side of the door. There was more than an even chance that Dattock had stationed Bill Garch or some other spy there.

"It's right that a pretty girl like you should be married to a man o' substance, Sister Kaymore," Morlen said. "You want to get settled in life. Make up your mind to be a faithful wife, helpin' your husband work and get along. Meet him with a smile when he comes home from the daily toil."

Her eyes twinkled at him for an instant, and then she bent her head again. Mart Morlen sat down beside her. He was fumbling in one of his pockets.

"The greatest job on earth that a woman c'n have is just bein' the right kind o' wife," he continued, speaking in stentorian tones and in an oratorical manner. "Think what you c'n do to this house, for instance. I'll bet that inside a month a body wouldn't know the place!"

He slipped his hand toward her own as he ceased speaking, and gave her half a dozen cartridges. "Get your gun and fill it," he whispered.

Liseta got to her feet and continued her acting. "I tell you I won't be married!" she cried.

"But you're sure goin' to be, Sister Kaymore, so you might as well smile about it. Never cry! A gent don't like tears. They dampen his spirits. I could go on for an hour tellin' you how you should treat a husband."

Liseta had crossed the room swiftly and silently as he spoke, and had picked up her six-gun from the floor, where Chris Dattock had thrown it. She filled the gun and returned it to her holster. Mart Morlen was on his feet again now, walking toward the window. He glanced out.

"Yeah, you want to be ever faithful and loyal and hard-workin'," he said. "Especially that last. Make your man proud o' you, so he'll boast in town what a fine wife he's got!—Is that your pony out there by my horse?" The last sentence was spoken in whispers.

Liseta nodded in the affirmative.

Morlen was inspecting the strips of wood that had been nailed across the window on the outside. He saw that they could not be removed quickly, or without making considerable noise and attracting the attention of the enemy.

"We'll have to make a break right through the front room and try to get to the horses," he whispered.

"I'm ready."

"Here are some more cartridges. Better slip 'em into your jacket pocket. It may be hot and heavy goin'."

"Anything is better than this," she said.

"Uh-huh! You just hold in your horses till I give the word. We want to be sure that we've got a fair chance."

Mart Morlen crossed the room to the door again. It remained open for not more than half a foot. He glanced out into the other room. Chris Dattock and Bill Garch were not to be seen, but one of the Double Box vaqueros was there, moving some of the furniture around.

Morlen winked at her warningly again, and continued his sermon anent married life. Liseta was doing a lot of rapid thinking. She never had seen this man before, never had heard his name, and did not know why he should have come to her rescue. It was something of a mystery. But to get away from the Double Box ranch house was the most important thing at the moment, she thought. Explanations could come later.

It would be sundown inside a couple of hours. Her father would be wondering what had become of her, would be worrying about her. Perhaps he would be sending out the two Bar K punchers who still remained with the outfit, to search for her. She wished that Morlen would hurry.

But Mart Morlen seemed to be determined to take his time about it. As he talked to her, he passed and repassed the door, and each time he glanced through it and into the other room, watching the vaquero working there. He could hear Dattock talking to somebody in another part of the house. Men were also talking and laughing outside, down by the bunkhouse, as they prepared for Dattock's wedding and the feast which was to follow.

"Yeah, you're sure a lucky girl to get such a husband, whether you think it or not," Morlen orated. "You ought to be laughin' instead o' weepin'. Just try to be calm, Sister Kaymore. Show the lucky bridegroom a smilin' and happy face." He whispered to her again. "Better get ready for action. That vaquero is fixin' to leave the other room."

Liseta went closer to him, watching him, ready to make a move as soon as he gave the word. He reached out and pulled the door open wider, moving it carefully so that the hinges made no sound. He put out his head and made a swift inspection of the living room.

Stepping back a few feet, he stripped off the black coat and tossed it aside. He yanked off the wilted collar and the white shirt, and hurled them from him as though they had been badges of some infamy. Beneath, he was wearing the proper garb for the range. Two guns, about which there was something that spoke of frequent use, swung from holsters in his belt.

Mart Morlen's manner had changed swiftly, too. He seemed to have doffed his comparative gentility with his black coat and white shirt. To Liseta Kaymore he did not seem to be the same person. He was suddenly alert, thoroughly alive, a man with nerves on edge, a fighter prepared to strike.

"Everybody's out o' sight now. Let's go!" he said.

CHAPTER VI

Chase and Battle

LISETA did not have the opportunity at that moment to do any more thinking about the situation. It was a time for action rather than thought. Mart Morlen had taken command, and she sensed that her part for the time being would be only that of a follower.

They slipped noiselessly into the big living room and went down its length rapidly, making for the closed front door. They could hear Chris Dattock boasting loudly to somebody else in one of the other rooms, and could hear the answering laughter of the man he addressed.

Mart Morlen moved swiftly, and with not much more noise than a lizard might have made. Liseta kept a pace behind him. When they came to the front door, Morlen opened it cautiously and looked out. His inspection of the immediate neighborhood was swift but thorough.

"Safe enough! Come on," he whispered.

An instant later, they were out on the wide veranda, and the door had been closed softly behind them. They ran across the porch and went skipping down the steps, intending to get around the corner of the building and reach their mounts. Their boots ground on the gravel of the lane.

Getting safely out of the house was a thing that had been managed very well, but they were not to reach their horses unseen. Down by the corral, one of the vaqueros happened to glance up from his work and catch sight of them as they darted around the corner of the veranda. He did not recognize Mart Morlen in that garb, but he knew Liseta and was aware of Chris Dattock's plans, and the manner of the pair told plainly that they were fugitives.

The vaquero screeched a warning. Bill Garch was not far away, and he ran toward the corral, howling questions. Some of the punchers rushed out of the bunkhouse.

"We've got to get goin' now," Morlen told Liseta. "They'll sure be right after us."

Caracol was standing in the shade beside Morlen's mount when he saw his mistress and this strange man running toward him. In an instant, Liseta and Morlen were in their saddles, and Caracol found that he was to have a running mate.

To get away from the Double Box, they were compelled to go into the lane and ride down it to the distant road. Their mounts were pushed to full speed immediately. Liseta found herself in the lead, and heard Mart Morlen's howl of command:

"You hit for home! I'm right behind you!"

As he finished shouting, one of his six-guns cracked. It was a random shot he sent flying back, not meant to wound or slay, but to discourage immediate and close pursuit and confound his enemies for a moment. He could see the Double Box punchers rushing around aimlessly.

Guns barked, and bullets flew near the two, but none struck home. On they dashed down the lane, urging their mounts, rapidly putting themselves beyond six-gun range, realizing that their advantage would be in getting as much a start as possible.

Back at the Double Box, Chris Dattock emerged from the house with his face covered with shaving lather. Bill Garch was already shouting orders, and men were rushing for their horses, with the exception of three—one of which happened to be Bill Garch's.

Chris Dattock was informed of the situation immediately. He wasted no time in senseless rage.

"After 'em!" he roared. "Go get 'em! Bring 'em back! Plug that hombre if you've got to, but don't hurt the girl! Get goin'! What you waitin' for?"

Bill Garch sprang into the saddle and ripped home the spurs. He led the other two Double Box punchers in a wild dash down the lane.

"Saddle my horse!" Chris Dattock was shouting to a vaquero down by the corral. "Saddle half a dozen! Pronto!"

The master of the Double Box outfit, cursing now like a madman, turned and dashed back into the house to get his guns. Down at the corral, punchers worked feverishly to catch up and saddle mounts. The horses had been frightened, and were milling, making their capture difficult.

Bill Garch and his two companions, already on the trail of the fugitives, were urging their mounts to utmost speed. Morlen and Liseta had reached the road and had turned north, toward the distant Bar K. For half a mile or so they had rough going, so that their foes gained on them rapidly as they traveled better ground. Bill Garch whipped out a gun and opened futile fire.

Morlen urged his horse up beside Liseta.

"Stick to good ground and make a run for it!" he shouted to her. "They'll have to travel some to get us!"

Liseta bent over Caracol's neck and "yip, yipped" into his ear. Caracol was willing to travel at top speed, especially since they were headed for home. Something seemed to tell the pony that he should get to the Bar K as quickly as possible. Caracol did not pretend to know what this was all about, but he felt that he would be safer at home, and his mistress also.

They dashed around a curve in the road, where frowning rocks hid the pursuit for a short time. Caracol's hooves were sending back a huge cloud of fine dust, and through this dust cloud Mart Morlen was compelled to ride. They dashed down one slope and began the ascent of another.

Here speed had to be slackened again, and here once more their three foes gained on them. Guns barked behind them, but they were out of good six-gun range. Morlen sent a couple of answering shots in the direction of the enemy.

Mart Morlen had a full realization of the situation. He knew that the Double Box men would try to bring him down. His escape would mean that Liseta Kaymore would have a witness to back up her story of what Chris Dattock had attempted. So he could expect no mercy from the Double Box men.

When they came to the top of the hill, level country was in front of them, and the ground was firm and the going good. From this spot it was not more than three miles to the Bar K ranch house. Around the next curve, they would be able to see the ranch buildings nestling in a tiny cup in the hills.

"Yip, yip!" Liseta cried.

Caracol was runing now with his ears back, his eyes blazing, and his belly to the ground. This was the sort of thing Caracol liked. He could hear the hooves of Morlen's horse pounding behind him, and that urged him to fresh endeavor. He'd show this strange horse a thing or two about running!

So Caracol lengthened his stride, listened for Liseta's "yip, yip," alive to every touch of a spur, every jerk on the reins. Presently, the sound of pounding hooves behind him grew fainter. He was beating that other horse, Caracol thought, running away from him. If this was a race, he would carry his mistress through a winner.

"Yip, yip!" Liseta cried again.

In answer to that appeal, Caracol forgot even the other horse, forgot everything except giving Liseta the speed she seemed to desire. He dashed around another curve, and heard the pounding hooves no more.

But there was a good and sufficient reason for that, and it was not the excessive speed of Caracol. As a matter of truth, Mart Morlen's mount could keep up with Caracol any day, barring accidents. But an accident had happened.

By turns watching Liseta flying in front of him, and glancing behind to see whether the enemy was gaining, Mart Morlen rode with speed and skill. The men behind were firing random shots again. Morlen did not take the trouble to fire in reply.

His mount suddenly missed stride, staggered, went on. Morlen thought nothing of it at first. But again the horse lurched and staggered, and Morlen knew he was hurt, whether by a chance bullet, or whether he had turned an ankle on a stone, Morlen did not know. But he did know that he could not go on, could not maintain that furious speed.

He was approaching a spot where the road curved through a little natural pass, to one side of which there was a jumble of rocks. He knew that he would be out of sight of the enemy for a moment there. His mount slackened speed again, seemed to be laboring.

Morlen pulled to one side of the road and sprang from the saddle. He jerked his rifle out of the saddle boot. An instant later he had left his horse with reins trailing, and was scrambling up among the rocks.

He came to the summit and flattened himself on the hard ground with a huge boulder for shelter. Bill Garch and the other two Double Box men were coming on at top speed. They caught sight of Morlen's horse standing beside the trail. Garch waved a hand at the others, and they slackened speed.

Morlen's rifle cracked. The bullet kicked up a spurt of dust a few feet ahead of the three, glanced and struck a rock, and sang off into the brush. Garch and his companions scattered, pulled to either side of the trail.

Bill Garch believed that Morlen was making a stand to allow Liseta a chance to escape. He knew that it would be suicide to try to ride through that little pass. He could not hope to recapture the girl. But perhaps he could seal Mart Morlen's lips forever.

Garch howled orders to the other two. As Morlen sent another bullet flying near them, all three sprang out of their saddles and rushed for cover. They had only six-guns, so Morlen held a small advantage as far as weapons were concerned. But the odds as a whole were three to one against him.

Changing position slightly, Mart Morlen prepared to withstand a siege. His rifle cracked, and one of the Double Box vaqueros sank back behind a rock with his right arm dangling. A fusillade came in reply. Bullets sang among the rocks, shrieked past Morlen's head. He changed his position again.

The enemy was quiet for a time, then, and Morlen guessed that they were trying to work toward him without exposing themselves. He became doubly alert. He saw an exposed leg, fired and missed. Once more there was a fusillade from six-guns, and Mart Morlen crouched behind his boulder until it was over and his foes were reloading, hoping that no ricocheted bullet would strike him.

He could tell from the firing that he had only two enemies with whom to contend. The vaquero he had wounded was out of the fighting, but Morlen sensed that Bill Garch and the other uninjured man were adept at this sort of fighting, and would know all the tricks.

He fired a random shot and drew three in return. He knew that all three came from the same gun. While one of his enemies maintained fire, the other was trying to get nearer. They were taking turns at it, he guessed. He grinned because the trick was such an old one.

He slipped back from the summit of the knoll and changed his position fifty feet to one side. There he crept to the summit again. A puff of smoke, the crack of a gun, revealed to him where one of the enemy was stationed, and he sent a couple of ineffectual bullets flying.

He had no chance to make a run for it. He was on the ground, quite a distance from his horse. He did not know how badly his horse was hurt, or how; did not know whether the animal would be able to carry a rider. He supposed that Liseta had got to the Bar K by this time, and was safe.

More bullets flew near him, and he settled down to the grim business of beating off his assailants. He exchanged shots at every opportunity. Then there was a period of quiet, and he guessed that Bill Garch and the vaquero were preparing to rush him, to run grave risks in an attempt to get to close quarters.

Morlen shifted his position again, getting to better cover and a slightly higher elevation. He swept the hillside

with rapid rifle fire, and reloaded quickly. He looked at his six-guns, put them on the ground beside him, scattered extra ammunition where he could easily reach it.

Once more a fusillade came from below, and again bullets sang dangerously near as they struck rocks and ricocheted. Morlen was holding his fire now until he could see a target. He suddenly heard shots from a different direction, heard Bill Garch bellowing something to his companion. That rather startled Mart Morlen. He wondered whether they were attempting some new sort of trick.

Then he saw something that startled him more. This last burst of firing had been from the weapon of a friend, not a foe. Garch and his companion had been flanked neatly, and were darting from rock to rock in careful retreat. Mart Morlen caught sight of the person who had come to his rescue.

It was Liseta!

CHAPTER VII

A Moment of Shame

MORLEN'S first shock of surprise was soon followed by another. He could see that Bill Garch and the vaquero were really in retreat, not merely retiring to a better and safer position with the idea of continuing the battle. Liseta emptied her six-gun in their direction, and they did not reply. They were making for their horses. Morlen saw them stop and give aid to the wounded man. Then they disappeared behind some rocks.

That was dangerous, Morlen knew. If Garch and his vaquero mounted, they could ride on ahead and block the trail to the Bar K Ranch. Scrambling over the rocks, Morlen hurried toward Liseta, to make her acquainted with this situation.

She was leaning nonchalantly against a boulder when he came to her, smiling as she reloaded her six-gun.

"What you doin' here?" Morlen demanded.

"Why, I missed you, and rode back to see what had happened," she replied.

"Yeah? Now we're in a nice mess! They'll mount and get between us and the Bar K."

"Oh, I never thought of that!" she said.

"You never thought o' that!" Morlen mimicked. "This here is a nice fix! But we'll get over the rocks and try to keep 'em from gettin' through the pass, or stealin' our mounts. You c'n keep behind."

"Why?" Liseta asked.

"Want to get shot?" he thundered at her. "I never did see such a girl! You were all fixed to get home safe—"

"Did you want me to ride away and leave you to get shot?" she asked. "Look back down the trail. See that dust cloud? More Double Box men coming, and Dattock is probably with them. How long would you have lasted?"

"Come on," Morlen urged. "We'll have to keep them two hombres from gettin' through the pass. Where's your pony?"

"Down beside the trail."

"Uh-huh! They'll get hold of him and my horse, and then we'll be plumb ruined."

"Look!" Liseta cried, suddenly.

Morlen looked. Bill Garch and his vaquero had come into view again, and they were mounted. The wounded man was mounted also, and they were helping him along. There was no question about it now—they were retreating.

And then Mart Morlen saw the reason for their move. Over a hill and down toward them came a couple of riders, guns out and blazing.

"They're Dad's punchers!" Liseta cried.

"Yeah? They've sure come at a danged good time," Morlen admitted. "Let's get down to our mounts. We'd better hit for the Bar K. If that's Chris Dattock comin', he'll follow until he gets almost to the ranch. You c'n lay a bet on that. He ain't yearnin' for me to get away."

The two Bar K punchers reached the trail, emptied their guns at the fleeing men, and then raced toward the little pass. Liseta and Morlen were in the trail when they rode up. Liseta explained a little of the situation to them as she got on Caracol.

Morlen got into his saddle, having decided, upon investigation, that his horse was not injured to any great extent, that possibly he had only suffered a sprain.

"Get goin'!" he snapped to Liseta. "I'll ride behind."

"You ride with me," Liseta ordered. "The boys will ride behind."

There was no argument about it. At a fair rate of speed they went to the top of the hill and started down the slope on the other side, with the Bar K ranch buildings in plain view. The two Bar K men stopped at the crest of the hill to watch the advancing enemy.

But Chris Dattock had no idea of following them as far as the Bar K. He knew that the range would arm against him if he did such a thing. So he ordered his men back, after blistering Bill Garch and the two who had been with him with caustic words. It was a time to retreat and fix up some story to tell, and lay plans for the punishment of a certain Mart Morlen.

"Now, maybe you'll tell me some things," Liseta said, as they started along the lane toward the Bar K ranch house.

"Ain't much to tell, I reckon."

"You got me out of the Double Box ranch house—"

"Oh, that!"

"Who are you, and why did you do it?"

"Well, I was fussin' around in Mesaburg, Miss Kaymore, and I happened to hear a man named Dave Bencher talkin' to one of his friends," Morlen said.

"Dave Bencher, the preacher?"

"He ain't a preacher—he's a gambler from the county seat, an old friend o' Dattock's. That was goin' to be just a trick marriage. I learned all the details. So I just watched my chance and got hold o' Mr. Bencher, and took him out o' town and tied him up where he wouldn' be found quick. Then I took his preacher clothes and faked up a note to Dattock, and rode out in Dave Bencher's place."

"To save me?" she asked.

"Yes'm, I reckon! I sure didn't aim to stand by and let any girl get tricked like that. I thought it'd be great fun to do it—and it was."

"But why?" Liseta insisted. "Why didn 't you just tell the sheriff or somebody like that?"

"Oh, they might have moved too slow, and there wasn't any time to waste!"

"Well, I'm thanking you, Mr. Morlen."

"Now, that ain't necessary at all."

"But still, I don't quite understand it," she told him. "So many men wouldn't have taken all that risk for a girl they didn't know. You've never seen me before, have you?"

"I never had the pleasure until today, ma'am. But that's my hard luck. I'd have been ridin' this here range a lot sooner if I'd known you were on it."

"You don't have to make pretty speeches."

"I don't even know that was a pretty speech," Mart Morlen said. "Gosh, I meant it!"

"That's a prettier speech than the other," Liseta told him, smiling. "It's almost sunset. You've got to come to the Bar K and stay the night, and let Dad and Bobby thank you."

"Oh, I was aimin' to pay a visit to the Bar K anyhow," Morlen replied.

Before she could ask him to explain that remark, the two Bar K punchers caught up with them and gave the information that the Double Box men had turned back toward home. Liseta explained a bit more of what had happened, and the two looked at Mart Morlen with greater interest and more kindness. Then, at Liseta's order, they rode ahead.

"We—we aren't in tip-top shape at the Bar K," she apologized.

"I've heard about it. But shucks, that ain't nothin'! Any outfit is liable to have a lean season now and then. Give me a cup o' coffee and a hunk o' bread, and a place to flop in the bunkhouse, and it'll suit me fine. I want to talk to your dad, too. I've heard a lot about him."

"Dad isn't—well, he isn't the man he used to be, not since my mother died," Liseta said.

"I know. You don't have to tell me nothin'."

"We'll turn our mounts into the corral, and then I'll take you to the house," she said.

The two punchers were waiting for them, to take their horses. One of them was trying to signal a message to Liseta, but she did not notice it.

"Where's Bobby?" she asked.

"I reckon that he went into town, miss," one of the punchers replied.

Liseta frowned. She knew what that meant. But she choked back the tears and tried to smile at Morlen. And before either of the Bar K punchers could tell her anything more, she was leading the way to the house.

Mart Morlen was inspecting the Bar K with rapid glances. What he saw told him the entire story of the ranch's deterioration. It wasn't the first splendid property he had seen going to ruin. There was a thoughtful look in his face as he followed Liseta up the rickety steps and across the creaking porch.

"How much of an outfit you got?" he asked.

"Just Dad and Bobby, and the two punchers," Liseta replied. "We've got an old Chinese cook who's been with us for years—can't drive him away. It's a lean season for us, all right!"

"Yeah? Well, I wouldn't worry too much about it, if I was you," Mart Morlen told her. "Lean seasons have a habit of endin' when you least expect it."

Liseta sighed as she opened the front door. It was almost dark in the house, but no lamps had been lighted in the front. They could hear the Chinese cook puttering around in the kitchen, and odors of cooking food were in the air.

"Just stand there till I find a lamp," Liseta said. "I guess Dad isn't back yet. He said he was going to ride up to the draw this afternoon."

Morlen remained standing just inside the door while she went slowly across the room. A match was struck, touched to the wick of a kerosene lamp. Liseta adjusted the chimney, and turned back toward him.

Then she gave a little cry, half of pity and half of embarrassment, and ran quickly across the room. Her father was stretched on a couch there. Mart Morlen hurried up beside her. But one glance was enough for Morlen, and also he had sniffed an odor he knew well. Sam Kaymore was not ill. He was sleeping the sleep of an intoxicated man who had drunk himself into a state of coma.

There was a moment of silence then, save for Sam Kaymore's slow, drunken breathing. Then Liseta sobbed, and her hands flew to her face in a gesture of shame.

Suddenly she felt Mart Morlen's arm across her shoulders, his hand patting her.

"Now, now," he said, softly. "That ain't doin' any good. That ain't the way to cure him."

"If he only could be cured!" she said. "He never did a thing like this before Mother died."

"I c'n understand all about it without you tellin' me," Morlen replied. "I know what a fine gent he used to be. You yearn to have him cured?"

"Yes—oh, yes!"

"If you want me to do it, I'll take the job for nothin' a month and found, and I'll guarantee results. But there's one condition I've got to make."

"What's that?" she asked.

"You'll stand back and keep hands off, and you'll see that the others keep

hands off. You don't know me, or anything about me. But if you c'n trust me some—"

"Oh, I feel that I can!" Liseta told him, without knowing exactly why she should say such a thing. "I'll stand back—and keep hands off!"

CHAPTER VIII

Kaymore Is Cured

MART MORLEN patted her on the shoulder again, a reassuring sort of pat that she liked. Then he straightened up and became severely business-like.

"Fair enough!" he said. "It's a deal! You tell that chink cook o' yours to get a big pot o' strong coffee ready. Then skip out and warn them two punchers o' yours to keep their hands off me, whatever I do."

"But what are you going to do?" Liseta asked.

"There you go, askin' questions already! I'm goin' to start the cure right here and now, since you're so anxious to know. No sense in wastin' time. I want to talk to your dad, and I can't do it while he's like this, can I?"

Without asking any more questions about it, Liseta hurried out into the kitchen to give the cook the order about the coffee. Mart Morlen stooped and lifted the unconscious Sam Kaymore and got his body across his shoulders. Then he strode through the front door, across the creaking porch, and down the rickety stairs to the ground.

The sun had disappeared behind the western hills, and the orange and scarlet banners of the sunset were gone from the sky. A soft dusk enveloped the range, but there remained light enough for Morlen's purpose. He had noticed several things before he had gone into the house, and one of them had been a large watering trough near the corral.

Mart Morlen strode toward this trough now, carrying Kaymore. Down at the bunkhouse, the two Bar K cowpunchers were washing up in basins on a bench outside the door. They saw Morlen and his peculiar burden, continued their washing process, but spoke together in low tones.

Morlen marched straight to the watering trough and dumped the owner of the Bar K outfit into the cool flood. There was a big splash, a gurgle. One of the men by the bunkhouse gave a yell of surprise and protest. Morlen grasped Sam Kaymore and pulled him out, so he would not drown.

"What you doin' there?"

The call came from one of the punchers, but Mart Morlen gave it not the slightest attention. He waited a moment, and then tossed Kaymore into the water again. The front door of the house was opened, a streak of light shot out, and through the streak ran Liseta, hurrying down to the corral to see what was happening.

"Hey, you—!" one of the punchers shouted.

The two men left the wash bench and started running toward the corral. Morlen noted that Liseta would reach the spot a moment before they could do so, and hence did not worry. He reached into the trough and pulled Sam Kaymore out of the flood. The Bar K's owner muttered, a sign of encouragement.

"What's all this?" one of the men cried.

Now Liseta was beside Morlen, too, fear for her father mirrored in her face.

"Don't—don't," she begged.

"Remember your promise—hands off!" Morlen said. "You'd better explain to these here wild waddies so they won't climb my frame, I reckon."

He dipped Kaymore again, hauled him forth, and propped him against a corral post. Kaymore was muttering again, trying to talk.

"Help me get him on his feet," Morlen ordered, presently.

The men sprang to help him, while Liseta watched from a few feet away. They forced Sam Kaymore to walk

back and forth along the corral fence, being almost compelled to drag him. After a time, Morlen returned to the trough, and once more ducked his man.

"It's one o' the kindest ways," he announced. "You reckon that coffee is ready, Liseta?"

"It should be."

"Then we'll take him to his house and to his bedroom. You c'n go ahead, Liseta, and search the house for liquor. Pour out one tumbler of it, and get the rest out o' the way. Don't have to destroy it, but get it where your father won't be able to find it."

They obeyed his orders without protest. Now that they understood the situation, they were glad to help. They knew that heroic methods were the only ones to use in such a case. But there had been nobody to use them before. They had not dared put heavy hands on their boss.

Mart Morlen carried Sam Kaymore back into the house and to his room. He stripped the clothes off the half-unconscious man, rubbed his body briskly with a coarse towel he found, and wrapped a blanket around him.

Liseta came to the door with the coffee. Morlen poured a cup and let it cool, while he sat beside Kaymore and shook him until his teeth chattered.

"You got to snap out of it!" Morlen announced. "I'm goin' to treat you cruel if you don't!"

"Who—who are you?" Sam Kaymore mouthed.

"Just now, I'm the doctor," Morlen replied. "You drink this coffee! Oh, I know you don't want to do it, but you're goin' to, just the same! One yap out o' you, and I'm goin' to smash you one! I'm the doctor just now, and, man, how I can doctor!"

"Gimme a drink!"

"Yeah, o' coffee!" Mart Morlen said. "Drink it!"

He compelled Sam Kaymore to drink. He poured another cup, and made him drink that. He went to the door and called Liseta, sent her for the bottle of household ammonia, and held it beneath Kaymore's nostrils.

That was only the start of it. Three-quarters of an hour later, Mart Morlen stepped into the living room. Liseta was there with the two punchers. They had eaten while Morlen had been at work, at Morlen's suggestion.

"He's gettin' into dry clothes, and he'll be out here soon," Morlen reported. "I reckon I threw a scare into him. He ain't sure just what I am. He thinks maybe I'm a deputy sheriff come to throw him out o' the old home."

The two punchers promptly retired to the bunkhouse, and presently Sam Kaymore came into the living room, a white, shaken, sick Sam Kaymore, who tottered when he walked and sank down in the nearest chair.

Morlen motioned to Liseta, and she went to her father, knelt beside him, comforting him. Placing another chair in front of Kaymore, Morlen sat down and made himself comfortable.

"Maybe I was some rough with you, Mr. Kaymore, but I just had to do it," Morlen said. "You needed a jolt, that's all. I'm understandin' everythin' about the situation. It was your wife's death got you started doin' this. But that ain't a very good way to keep her memory green, is it?"

Tears gushed suddenly from Sam Kaymore's eyes, and he put his hands to his face.

"I want that you should understand why I'm doin' this," Morlen said. "You might remember me, if you think back a long ways. I was only five years old when my father moved from these parts and went to Montana. Morlen! Don't you remember?"

"I—I seem to remember a Bill Morlen—" Kaymore began.

"Sure! That was my dad. He went to Montana and got into business there, and he did right well. Died about six months ago, and left nobody but me."

"Bill Morlen's boy!"

"Yeah! Just a little shaver when we left here. I got sick o' the north after

my father died, and thought that I'd drift down here. I came to the Mesaburg range solely 'cause o' you."

"'Cause o' me?" Kaymore asked, weakly.

"Yeah! My father always held you up to me, Mr. Kaymore. He thought that you was about the finest man alive. He was always comparin' other men to you. I've been carryin' a picture o' you in my mind ever since I was a little boy. A fine, upstandin' man, knowin' how to appreciate his friends and fight his enemies! A man for a boy to pattern after, my dad used to say."

"I—I—" Kaymore seemed unable to focus his thoughts.

"So I came here, Mr. Kaymore, to see that pattern of a man, and maybe settle down and live my life near him. And what do I find, Mr. Kaymore? I heard the whole story in the county seat, and I heard it again in Mesaburg. Sam Kaymore, a man others turn up their noses at! Sam Kaymore—slippin'!"

"Don't, boy—don't!"

"Maybe it'll do you good to listen, Mr. Kaymore. You want that my mind picture o' you should be ruined? You want me to go away from here, tellin' myself that my dad must have been crazy to talk about you the way he did? I'd hate to do that, 'cause I thought a lot o' my dad, Mr. Kaymore."

"I—I can't think what to say!"

"Uh-huh! A fine, upstandin' man you are! Slippin'! Lettin' your property go to ruin. Lettin' your son go to ruin 'cause you ain't man enough to keep him straight just at the time he needs a guidin' hand. Lettin' your daughter be open to insult, 'cause nobody's afraid o' what you might do about it."

"What's that?" Kaymore gasped.

"She'll tell you about it later, maybe."

"I'll tell him now," Liseta said. "Dad, Chris Dattock caught me on the range and took me to his house. He—he planned a mock marriage with me. Mr. Morlen got me away, and shot them up some—"

"You call me Mart, Liseta. By the way, you did some shootin' up your own self," Morlen interrupted.

"Tell me—tell me," Kaymore begged them.

Morlen got up and walked around the room while Liseta gave her father the details of the affair. When she had finished, Morlen stopped in front of Kaymore and looked down at him.

"Well, Mr. Kaymore, it's up to you now," he said. "If I've given you a jolt, I'm right glad. You ain't really the kind o' man to do this thing. Are you goin' to make my father out a liar? Liseta!"

"Yes, Mart?"

"You go get that tumbler. Your dad feels pretty sick and weak right now, I reckon."

Liseta hurried into the kitchen, and Mart Morlen walked back and forth across the room again, saying nothing, while Sam Kaymore sat bent forward in his chair, his face buried in his hands. When Liseta came back, Morlen hurried up to her and took the glass from her hand.

"I reckon that a lot o' water and a powerful lot o' coffee on an upset stomach calls for some medicine," Morlen said. "I know all about these kind o' cases, Mr. Kaymore. So I told Liseta to save you a big, stiff drink. Here it is."

Sam Kaymore raised his head, revealing the misery in his face. He closed his eyes an instant, opened them again. He raised a shaking hand and clutched the glass, put his other hand to it quickly in an effort to steady it. It was a pathetic sight.

"Take your medicine! A good, stiff jolt!" said Mart Morlen.

Sam Kaymore got out of the chair, tottered forward, made his shoulders straight, and then started down the room. He went to the front door and opened it—and hurled the glass far into the night. Then he turned and tottered back toward them.

"Thanks, lad—thanks!" he said. "I'm cured! I'll try hard to be the man your father said I was."

CHAPTER IX

A Poker Game Begins

AN hour later, Mart Morlen kicked open the door of the bunkhouse and found the two Bar K waddies sitting on the sides of their bunks removing their boots. Morlen announced simply that he was going to retire and would see them in the morning. His attitude was that of a man who did not wish to be questioned.

The Bar K men made him welcome and kept their questions to themselves. All three turned in, after extinguishing the kerosene lamp, rolled in their blankets, and presently snored.

They were out with the dawn, washing in ice-cold water in the basins on the bench, gulping and yawning, stretching their arms and legs. They were strong men, used to rough living and glorying in plain man strength.

The Chinese cook beat a pan, and they trooped to the kitchen to eat. Since the Bar K outfit had dwindled, the big punchers' eating room was not in use. Neither Sam Kaymore nor Liseta appeared during the meal.

Out in the open again, Mart Morlen walked with the other two toward the corral, offering to help them with the chores.

"I reckon Bobby's at it again," one of the punchers said.

"At what?" Morlen asked.

"Playin' with the cards in Mesaburg. He's ruinin' himself and everybody else. Keeps the old man broke payin' his gamblin' debts. The worst of it is, the lad is bein' robbed. Them there losses o' his at poker ain't all legitimate by any means. Breakin' his sister's heart, too."

"When did he go to town?" Morlen asked.

"He sneaked away yesterday, right after his sister went for a ride. The old man was drinkin' in the house and didn't notice. But what could we do about it? It ain't the thing for us waddies to go tellin' the son o' the boss he can't play cards."

They went about their chores, and Mart Morlen caught up his horse in the corral, put saddle and bridle on, and led him forth. He filled a canteen, inspected his rifle and six-guns, and got up into the saddle. Without another word to the two punchers, he turned his mount and loped slowly down the lane and toward the distant road.

When he came to the main trail, he turned toward the town of Mesaburg. The sun was just coming up in a cloudless sky. The day would be hot. Mart Morlen dropped his neckerchief, made and lighted a cigarette, and slouched to one side of his saddle in a comfortable position, thinking as he rode.

It was only five miles from the Bar K to the town. Morlen did not seem to be in any particular haste. He appeared to be inspecting the terrain carefully as he followed the trail, and at the crest of every hill he stopped his mount to look forward and back, and to either side.

When he finally topped a hill from the summit of which he could see the little cluster of buildings in the distance, he seemed to become even more alert. Half a mile from the town he brought his horse to a stop, drank from the canteen, dampened his neckerchief and carefully washed the dust out of his eyes, and then went on.

As he rode, he inspected his six-guns again. He was humming a song of the range, but he was not off guard, his mind was not wandering. There seemed to be little activity in the town. Mesaburg was only a cluster of poor huts around a general store and a resort. The county seat twenty miles away was the principal trade center for the district.

Morlen entered the end of the town's one crooked street with his horse at a walk. Half a dozen mounts were tethered at the hitch-rails in front of the store and the resort. Morlen scrutinized their brands as he approached.

He stopped in front of the store, dismounted, tied his horse, and stretched

to remove saddle cramp. He drifted into the store to find it empty of humans save for the proprietor. Morlen bought a sack of smoking tobacco, and took his time about making a fresh cigarette. That was to give the storekeeper a chance to talk.

"Anything new hereabouts?" Morlen asked.

The storekeeper narrowed his eyes as he replied, "They're sayin' that some jasper made a monkey out o' Dave Bencher."

"Yeah? How's that?"

"I didn't hear all the details, stranger."

"Shucks, I ain't any stranger! My name's Mart Morlen, and I'm workin' for the Bar K outfit."

"Yeah? I didn't know that Sam Kaymore was takin' on any new help."

"You know it now."

"Uh-huh! But you won't have any Bar K to work for long, if somebody don't make Bobby Kaymore stop tryin' to play poker. He's a lamb in a den o' hungry lions."

"Like that, huh?"

"I ain't sayin' anything, you understand," the storekeeper remarked. "But, if I was aimin' to say somethin', I'd say that it's a sin and a shame the way the Kaymore bunch has been goin' downhill lately. A fine old family! And there's smooth gamblers who'd fleece a boy, knowin' his father would break himself to pay the crooked debts, until maybe some man as wanted it would get his ranch—"

"Uh-huh!" Morlen interrupted him. "There seems to be quite a few hombres in town for this early in the day."

"Yeah! Some of 'em have been here all night. Bill Garch o' the Double Box, is fussin' around. He has another Box man with him."

"Chris Dattock happen to be in town, too?"

"Ain't seen him. You generally c'n tell. Dattock always rides a big white horse."

"That's right consistent of him," Morlen said.

He grinned at the storekeeper understandingly, got a grin in reply, and went forth into the bright sunshine. The resort was directly across the crooked, dusty street. Morlen crossed to it and stood silent for a moment just outside the door. The talk he heard gave him little information.

Adjusting his holsters and making sure that the flaps were unfastened, he stepped into the resort. His first glance showed him a poker game going, and a couple of men standing at the bar engaged in conversation. Morlen ignored these two after one swift look, and strode toward the poker table.

Seated at the table were Bobby Kaymore, Bill Garch, Dave Bencher and one of the Double Box vaqueros. Dave Bencher was the first to glance up and identify Morlen. Bill Garch did so half a second later. But, before they could make a move, they found themselves looking into the muzzle of one of Mart Morlen's six-guns.

"Take it easy, gents!" Morlen warned. "Hands flat on the table! I'm just a mite nervous this mornin', and any quick move on your part might cause this here gun to explode. Just notice where it's pointin', and you c'n imagine what'd happen in such a case."

"You—you—" Dave Bencher sputtered.

"No hard words, Brother Bencher! How's the preachin' business these days? By the way, Brother Bencher, I left your black coat and white shirt out at the Double Box. The collar's a wreck, havin' been melted by the sun. But that's your loss."

"You've got nerve to come here!" Bill Garch growled.

"Well, if it ain't Mister Garch!" Morlen said. "Last time I saw you, Mr. Garch, you were doin' some pretty swift retreatin' with a flock o' bullets fannin' past your ears."

"Yeah? Talk big! I'll have a little somethin' to say later," Bill Garch threatened.

"Any time," Morlen told him. "You'll

always find me somewhere around. Just now, I got an idea to play some poker. Seein' as how you ain't got but four at table, it'd be polite to ask me to sit in."

"Costs money to sit in this game," Bencher said.

"I got enough to buy me one stack o' chips, I reckon," Mart Morlen replied. "That's all I need. I always buy one stack o' chips and make it grow."

He sat down in the fifth chair, making it necessary for a couple of them to move slightly. But they were careful to make no move that might be misconstrued as hostile. Bencher and Bill Garch were wondering at his audacity and trying to guess what this unexpected visit might mean.

The Double Box vaquero understood the situation. But Bobby Kaymore, knowing nothing of what had happened at the Double Box, along the trail, and at the Bar K, and not knowing Morlen, could not understand at all. He sensed a hostility between Morlen and the others, and put it down to something that had happened in the past.

"One little stack o' chips," Morlen repeated, tossing some money on the table. "Handle yourselves careful, gents. I'm still nervous!" He glanced swiftly at Bobby. "You're young Kaymore, ain't you?" he asked.

"Yeah," Bobby replied.

"How much have you lost since you got into this here game yesterday?"

"That any o' your business?" Bobby asked.

"From that remark, I'd judge you've lost considerable. Yeah, it's my business in a way. Poker is supposed to be a game o' chance, and we want to keep her pure and undefiled. But there ain't any chance to this here game—not a chance o' you winnin', anyhow."

"Are you tryin' to accuse somebody o' somethin'?" Bill Garch snapped.

"Why, sure and certain! Don't everybody know that this here game is crooked? You can bet that I sure aim to play crooked, gents. I aim to sit here and play until I win back every I. O. U. you've got from Young Kaymore, and maybe win back a lot o' cash besides."

"What business is it o' yours?" Bobby asked.

"We'll go into that later, young feller," Morlen told him. "Whose deal?"

Garch and Bencher exchanged quick glances, and the latter picked up the cards. He shuffled them nervously.

"You stay out o' my affairs!" Bobby cried at Morlen. "Who are you, anyhow?"

"The name's Mart Morlen, and I'm workin' for the Bar K outfit. Your father hired me last night, to do certain things. I reckon that I'm the new foreman o' the outfit."

"That's news to me," Bobby said.

"I reckon. You ought to hang around the ranch once in a while and find out what's goin' on. There's a lot o' news out that way. Didn't Dave Bencher or Bill Garch tell you anything at all?"

"What do you mean?" Bobby cried.

"We don't want to go into it now and spoil this here poker game. Deal 'em up, Brother Bencher. Play as dirty as you know how. I want to see how good you are, Brother Bencher. But, o' course, the first time I catch you cheatin', there'll be fireworks."

"You goin' to play crooked, and want us to play straight—that it?" Bencher snarled.

"That's it, Brother Bencher! You're goin' to get a dose o' your own medicine. Um! I'll have to take a couple o' cards to match up these. Mister Garch, I reckon that it's your bet!"

CHAPTER X

Saved Again

MORLEN was sitting with his back to the wall, so that no man could get behind him, and from his chair he had a good survey of the room. It was a position of advantage and safety.

He put his six-gun on the table at his right hand, grinning as he did so, and he watched the others carefully. He

had nothing to fear from the bewildered Bobby Kaymore. But Bencher, Bill Garch, the Double Box vaquero—Morlen knew any of them would try a chance shot at the first opportunity.

So began a poker game queer in the annals of Mesaburg. At Morlen's command, the others dropped out or bet. At Morlen's mere statement, they tossed down good hands. Mart Morlen won every pot, and since he compelled high betting, the pots were large.

Stacks of chips were soon on the table before him. He peered over them, his eyes gleaming, every look a menace.

"What's the use of all this here?" Dave Bencher said, at the end of an hour. "You're just robbin' us."

"That there remark sure has its funny side," Morlen told him. "It's always funny to hear a thief talkin' o' bein' robbed."

"There'll come a reckonin'," Bill Garch threatened.

"You're gettin' one now," Morlen told him. "I've got about all Bobby's paper back, and we're gettin' into your cash reserve. Another half an hour ought to do it."

"This ain't any o' your business!" Bobby Kaymore stormed. "I can't take them I. O. U.'s. It wouldn't be sportin' to do it. I lost—and I'm payin'."

"You mean your old dad is payin'," Morlen snapped at him. "'Stead of helpin' him work and get along, you waste your time and his money. Wreckin' the ranch over a card table. Don't you understand, you young fool, what's been goin' on?

"Dave Bencher here is a card shark. So's Bill Garch! And Chris Dattock ain't a bit better. They've been trimmin' you regular, between 'em, for a month or more. First thing you know, they'll have the Bar K, the whole outfit! Your fault—you good-for-nothin' rat!"

"Say—" Bobby began.

"Hands down on the table!" Morlen snapped. "I'll plug you as quick as I would one o' these here snakes. Maybe it'd be a boon to your family if I did sling a little hot lead your way. Play poker, damn you, and play your best! A part o' my job as foreman o' the Bar K is to make a man out o' you, and you c'n bet I'm goin' to do it!"

"So the baby's got a nursemaid, has he?" Bill Garch sneered.

His words seemed to have the effect of stinging Bobby Kaymore into both rage and action.

"You c'n bet that I ain't got a nursemaid!" the boy cried. "I don't know this jasper or anything about him. I think he's lyin' about workin' for Dad, and I ain't takin' back any promises to pay what he won with crooked cards!"

"But I've already torn up a lot of 'em," Mart Morlen pointed out. "And somethin' seems to tell me that if there's any more out, the hombres as have 'em will hesitate some about tryin' to collect!"

"You think you c'n get away with this here kind o' deal?" Bill Garch asked. "We won't always be under the muzzle o' your gun, feller! We'll get at you sometime when the chances are more even—"

"Any time, Mister Garch!" Morlen interrupted. "You want to step into the street now and shoot it out? I ain't had a real gun ruckus for a month, and I sure don't want to get out o' practice. I'm ready any time you are, Mister Garch! That goes for Brother Bencher, too, and for this here dish-faced vaquero who's playin' with us!"

"Señor—" the vaquero began.

"Shut up!" Morlen ordered. "Now, Brother Bencher, you're bettin' fifty on that hand you're holdin'. I thank you! Mister Garch, you're seein' him and raisin' fifty. Around to me, huh? I'm just callin'. Never mind showin' your hands this time, gents—I know I've got you beat!"

He grinned and raked in the chips.

"I'm cashin'," he announced suddenly. "You're the banker, Brother Bencher. I'll have cash."

"I—I'll have to go to the bar to get some."

"I reckon not, Brother Bencher!

Shell out, and be quick about it. It's right dirty money, but I'll take it and clean it up and make use of it somehow. Count them chips, Brother Bencher, and be mighty sure you count 'em straight."

He leaned back a trifle in his chair as Dave Bencher began stacking chips with fingers that trembled, but he was not off guard, and they sensed it. None of them made a move while Dave Bencher, as slowly as he dared, stacked chips and counted out cash for the most of them.

The bartender and the two men at the bar had kept their distance during that game. Once or twice a man had come in from the street, had heard a few whispered words, and had hurried away out of the possible trouble zone. Nobody had ridden in from the range.

It was the hottest part of the day now, and there was little possibility of an influx of riders who might go to the assistance of Bill Garch and Dave Bencher. Morlen judged that it would be a good time to get Bobby Kaymore away. He stuffed the money into his pockets and grinned across the table at them.

"It's been a right profitable little game," Morlen said.

"I'm not goin' to stand for this!" Bobby Kaymore cried.

"You shut up and keep quiet!" Morlen snapped. "I'll 'tend to you later. What you mean playin' poker in town when you'd ought to be at the ranch workin'?"

"You—you tryin' to boss me?"

"Sure and certain! You're nothin' but a Bar K cowpuncher at present, and I'm your foreman. Don't you be forgettin' that for a minute. And I reckon that it's time for us to be amblin' along toward the ranch."

Once more looks were flashed around the table. They had no intention of letting Mart Morlen get away with that money, and here and now, they judged, would be the best time to remove his menace forever.

Morlen seemed to be ignoring their looks, did not seem to sense the tension in the air. Bobby Kaymore sat back from the table a bit, licking at lips suddenly feverish, realizing now that a clash was about due, and in his inexperience being half afraid and half eager for the outcome.

Morlen's right hand went out and touched the six-gun on the table. He drew it toward him slowly. Suddenly he was on his feet, and his chair had been kicked back against the wall.

"Where's your mount, Bobby?" he asked.

"At the hitch-rail. But I ain't goin' home with you!"

"You're goin' home with me if I've got to knock you on the head and carry you," Morlen said. "This here is your ranch foreman talkin', you young wastrel. Start for the door!"

Bobby backed away as though undecided what to do. Morlen eyed the others.

"I'll have your guns on the table, gents, one man at a time," he said. "Then you, Brother Bencher, and Mister Garch, and the Señor Dish Face, will elevate your hands and march out into the street. You'll march up it to the end o' the trail, and there we'll bid you fair adios and be on our way rejoicin'. Guns on the table, gents, and be careful how you move when you do it. We'll start with Brother Bencher."

Dave Bencher cursed fluently. His face was white, his lips were trembling. He carefully thrust back the side of his coat, and reached toward his holster. Bill Garch and the vaquero kept their hands flat on the table before them.

"If any o' you gents yearn to have a ruckus with me later, you c'n look me up," Morlen then continued. "I'll be around. I'm askin' only one thing, hombres—come at me from in front."

Dave Bencher's hand rested on the butt of the gun. Slowly, he started to extract it from the holster. He felt the humiliation of the moment, as his blazing eyes and white face testified.

"I ain't got all day," Morlen said.

Then the tension was broken. The Double Box vaquero howled a curse, sprang out of his chair, and his hand dived for the weapon he wore. At the same instant Dave Bencher jerked out his own six-gun.

Mart Morlen dropped and spilled the table toward them. Shots crashed. The table top was splintered as bullets tore through it. Morlen sprang half a dozen feet to one side while their attention was concentrated on the table. His gun spat flame! Dave Bencher dropped his weapon, whirled, fell to the floor.

A bullet burned Morlen's shoulder. Another blew the hat from his head. A third passed so close that he felt its hot breath on his cheek. He emptied his first gun, yanked out the second.

Through the haze of smoke, as he darted to a new position, to the semi-security afforded by a table and some chairs, he took stock of the situation. Bencher was down and out of the fighting. The vaquero was staggering backward toward the bar. His left arm was dangling, but he was still able to shoot. Bobby Kaymore, frightened now at the swift turn of events, was crouching against the wall. Bill Garch had darted through the smoke, shooting as he went, and had got behind the end of the bar.

It was Garch from whom Morlen had the most to fear. As another bullet fanned his cheek, the latter tossed a quick shot and disposed of the belligerent vaquero. Then he made a dive across the room, firing twice as he went, trying to reach the other end of the bar.

He slipped, crashed to the floor. The accident saved him, tossed him out of the path of Garch's shot. But when he struck, his gun flew from his hand and rested on the floor just out of reach.

"Don't try it!" That was Bill Garch, springing toward him with weapon held ready, warning Morlen not to try to reach for the gun on the floor.

But there wasn't anything else to do except get the gun back, the way Mart Morlen looked at it. Bill Garch would probably fling one more shot, and that would be aimed carefully and would be fatal.

"Steady!" Bill Garch screeched out again, coming on toward Morlen.

Suddenly Morlen was on his feet, darting to one side, making a dive for the weapon he wanted to clasp. Garch's gun spat, and the bullet missed Morlen by inches. Billows of smoke made the target elusive and Garch's aim uncertain.

Then another gun cracked, and as he reached his own weapon and turned to use it, Mart Morlen beheld Bill Garch reeling back, howling his rage. His six-gun was on the floor, and he was clasping his right shoulder with his left hand.

Turning to look for the unseen, for the second time within the space of twenty-four hours, Mart Morlen saw Liseta Kaymore with a flaming weapon in her hand.

CHAPTER XI

A Common Cowpoke

SHE stood just inside the door, surveying the scene, her face flushed and her breathing a little rapid, but otherwise seemingly not bothered by what she saw. Mart Morlen gave quick glances at Bencher and the vaquero and saw that he had nothing to fear from them. Then he darted across to Garch and searched him for more weapons, but found none.

"I—I'll get you for this!" Garch hissed at him.

"Why didn't you get me just now?" Morlen asked.

"That—that girl—"

"I was on my feet and fightin' when she winged you. Any time you want to look me up, Garch, after that shoulder is well, I'll be workin' at the Bar K."

Then he went on toward the door, toward where Liseta was waiting for him.

"Let's get out of here," he suggested. "Call that brother o' yours."

He led the way outside, and Bobby

followed when Liseta beckoned him. A dozen excited men were in the street, rushing toward the resort to learn what battle had been fought. Morlen stopped at the hitch-rail and waited for Liseta and Bobby to come up to him.

"What are you doin' here?" he asked Liseta.

"I learned you had come to town, and I supposed it was to get Bobby. And I knew you might run into trouble," she said.

"Uh-huh! You spendin' your days runnin' around and mixin' in my gun-fights? That makes twice you've saved me. Yesterday and to-day. A man'd think you had some special interest in me."

Her face burned. "I didn't want to have you get hurt on account of our troubles," she said.

"I'm the foreman o' the outfit, ain't I?" he asked. "It's my business to take on the troubles o' that outfit, ain't it? Did you just come to town to mix in this here ruckus, or have you got somethin' else to do?"

"Nothing else. Maybe we'd better go home."

"Let's get our horses, then."

He hurried across the street to get his own from the hitch-rail in front of the store. By the time he had got into the saddle, Bobby and Liseta had mounted, and Caracol was pawing the ground as an indication that he wished to be in action, despite the fact that his mistress had ridden him cruelly to get to town.

Mart Morlen rode back to them and called to some of the men in front of the resort.

"If anyone wants to know about this fight, you know where to find me," he said. "I didn't start the ruckus."

"And you ain't goin' to finish it!" Bill Garch cried from the door.

Garch had got the vaquero's gun, and there was a single unexploded shell in it, and now, holding the gun in his left hand, he fired. The bullet flew wild. Garch cursed, threw the gun out into the street, and stood waiting.

But Morlen did not shoot him down. He merely laughed in a taunting manner, wheeled his horse, and led the way up the dusty street and out of town.

Liseta and Bobby rode behind him. Morlen began singing a song of the range as he reloaded his guns. When he had finished with that job and had buttoned the flaps of his holsters, he found that the other two had come up beside him.

"Liseta, you've simply got to stop runnin' around wild and shootin' up the country," Morlen said. "I never did see such a girl! I ain't sayin' but what your interference, both yesterday and to-day, wasn't right welcome, but there's entirely too much risk on your part."

His bantering brought no response. Morlen glanced at her. He saw that color stained her face, that her eyes were blazing.

"You ain't mad at me, are you?" he asked. "If I've said or done anything wrong, ma'am, I'm sure right down sorry. I was just makin' light talk."

"I'm not mad at you, Mart. I think you're a splendid man, doing what you are for us. I'm not mad at all—I'm ashamed."

"What of? That was a right pretty shot you made when you nicked Bill Garch in the shoulder."

"I'm ashamed of my brother!" she cried. "My own brother—a Kaymore! Standing there against the wall like a coward, letting them try to get you, when you were fighting for him, for all of us. My brother—with a clean gun at a time like that!"

"Aw, Liseta—" Bobby began.

"Running wild, gambling away our money, worrying us half to death was bad enough. But we could have stood that. How can we stand it to know we've got a coward in the family?"

"—I ain't a coward!" the boy cried. "I don't know this Morlen jasper. I thought he was lyin' when he said he was workin' for us."

"You'd better get to know him, then. If it hadn't been for him, I— Well,

Bobby, Chris Dattock got me to his house yesterday, and he was going to force me to marry him—only it was to be a fake marriage. Mr. Morlen saved me, got me out of the house and took me home, gunfighting to do it."

"You did some yourself, Liseta," Morlen said, grinning.

"And then he made a man out of Dad, in less than a couple of hours," the girl rushed on to her brother. "Dad's all right now. He won't drink any more. And then, this morning, when the boys told him that you were in town gambling, Mr. Morlen—"

"The name is Mart!"

"All right, Mart! When he heard you were making a fool of yourself, Bobby, he rode to town alone, not knowing but what the whole Double Box would be waiting for him, maybe in ambush, just to try to get you away. And then you—you, a Kaymore—stood against the wall and watched him fight alone!"

"I—I didn't know," Bobby said. "You've got to forgive me, Sis."

"Maybe—when you show me you're a man!" she said. "You can ride a few feet ahead now. I want to talk to Mr. Morlen."

"The name is Mart!"

"Oh, yes! I—I want to talk to Mart."

Bobby rode ahead, and Mart looked at her and grinned again.

"You ain't got any business makin' me out a hero like that," he said. "Now I'll have to live up to it. And this livin'-up-to-it business is right hard."

"Like in Dad's case."

"Now, I didn't mean that, Liseta. How is your father to-day?"

"He found a bottle of liquor where I had cached it away."

"Yeah? Then he—"

"And he smashed it," Liseta continued. "Oh, Mart, I'm so glad!"

"There wasn't anything highly unusual in it, Liseta. Your dad got a terrible jolt when your mother died. He just had a weak moment, I reckon. One weak moment can't wreck a man like your dad."

"It'll be a hard fight," she said. "The Double Box will be after us now. Dattock and his men will do everything mean."

"Uh-huh! You mean that they'll start a sneakin' range war 'stead o' comin' right out in the open about it. They'll burn hay, and poison water holes and stock, and zip a few bullets around. I've seen that before, Liseta, and never an outfit did them tricks yet but what got the worst of it."

"I—I hope we'll pull through."

"I'm right down surprised at you doubtin' it, Liseta. That there's a reflection on me. Ain't I the new foreman?"

"Foreman of what?" she asked. "Two ordinary cowpokes and a run-down outfit!"

"I won't have you criticizin' the Bar K that way. We'll get along, all right. And I got three cowpokes under me, 'stead of only two."

"How's that?"

"Why, Bobby," Morlen replied. "Mr. Robert Kaymore is goin' to make a man of himself. He's goin' to be a reg'lar cowpoke."

"Of course, Bobby will help."

"You don't know the half of it," Morlen said. "Got the gamblin' fever, has he? That's worse than the booze fever. But it c'n be cured. I'll cure him, all right. I'll keep him so busy he won't have any time to gamble. And you remember one thing—you're to keep hands off."

"I'll be remembering it, Mart."

"That's fine."

Then they rode in silence over a hill and down into a dusty little valley where they pulled protecting neckerchieves up over their mouths and nostrils to their eyes. Bobby was only a short distance ahead. They did not anticipate trouble, but Morlen kept close watch on the trail and the surrounding country.

After a time they could see the Bar K buildings in the distance, and their mounts quickened pace, as range horses always will when they know the corral

is in the near distance. The neckerchieves came down. Morlen made a cigarette, puffed it, sang softly with it drooping from one corner of his mouth. He looked straight ahead now as he rode, but Liseta looked at him a great deal of the time.

They could see Sam Kaymore in front of the house as they approached, and he was waiting for them on the porch when they finally drew rein.

"I—I'm glad you're all back," Kaymore said. "I'd have gone myself, after I found that Liseta had ridden to town, only—"

"Wasn't necessary at all, sir," Morlen put in. "I found this here young gent bein' fleeced proper at a poker table, and I won back a lot he'd lost. Won some cash, too, which you're to take in place o' what's been lost."

"Can't do that, Morlen. Poker is poker."

"Yeah, I know. But the money wasn't lost in an honest game, sir. I just roughed 'em up some and took back what they'd stolen."

"Yeah, and he shot Bencher and a vaquero, and Liseta shot Bill Garch," Bobby put in.

Morlen turned toward him. "You keep quiet about such things," he ordered. "Miss Kaymore c'n tell her father, I reckon. You keep your place!"

"Wh—what—?" Bobby gasped.

"Mr. Kaymore, I'm the foreman o' this here Bar K outfit, ain't I? This young hombre ain't quite sure about it."

"You're the foreman, Morlen. What you say, goes."

"Thanks! Bobby, turn your horse into the corral. Then get your blankets and stuff and put 'em into the bunkhouse."

"Wh—what?"

"You heard me, all right. And don't answer back. For the time bein' you ain't the son o' the boss and you ain't got any special privileges. You're a common cowpoke, and you'll live in the bunkhouse. And you'll get up at dawn and do your share o' the chores. You'll take orders from me, and there'll be plenty of them."

"Are you crazy?" Bobby cried. "You tryin' to make me laugh?"

"I'll leave it to your dad."

Sam Kaymore hesitated for a moment. He looked first at Morlen and then at his son, and then he bent his head.

"Morlen is the foreman o' the outfit, and what he says goes," he announced. "You're a common cowpoke, Bobby, until he says different."

"Get goin', Bobby!" Mart Morlen snapped. "Move the things you need, and then get into your overalls, pronto! I got a job ready for you!"

CHAPTER XII

Word from Dattock

ON a Sunday afternoon about two weeks later, Caracol was wandering around inside the corral and spending the hours lazily. He stopped in a tiny patch of shade to dream, and felt another horse move up beside him. Caracol turned his head and found that his visitor was Mart Morlen's mount.

Caracol had learned during the past two weeks that this horse went by the queer name of Hank. The latter explained that it was a pet name, but Caracol was inclined to the belief that it was sarcastic. However, he liked Hank. It pleased Caracol that Hank, a sort of tourist in the country, so to speak, did not adopt the usual superior airs and criticize everything and everybody.

"Nice day," Hank suggested.

"Yes," Caracol admitted. "We always have nice days this time of the year."

"Everything seems to be improving around here," said Hank.

"Yes," Caracol agreed. "Your master is a good man and knows the cow business. But he's working our punchers to death."

"But look at the results!" said Hank. "Buildings painted and fences repaired. New porch on the house. The yard is

cleaned up. He's put the chickens in pens, instead of letting them run all around the place, getting under our feet. Did you ever step on a chicken?"

"Once," Caracol confessed. "And it squashed!" He shuddered a bit at the memory.

"He's taking the kinks out of that young Mr. Bobby, too," Hank continued.

"Master Bobby needed it," Caracol agreed. "But he's not taking to it any too kindly. Bobby is a queer boy. He pretends that he agrees with everything, but I've got my doubts. I was talking to Bobby's horse only yesterday, and he thinks that Bobby is fixing to run away from home."

"It's a wonder we haven't had some trouble with that Double Box outfit," Hank said. "From all I've heard of Chris Dattock, he's not the man to quit a fight."

"That may come later," Caracol replied. "They've been entirely too quiet since that trouble in town, so they're possibly planning something. Bill Garch's shoulder is about well, and that man Bencher is up and around again."

"I sure hope that nothing happens to spoil things," said Hank. "And I suppose we'll be seeing a lot of each other from now on."

Caracol looked at him suspiciously. "What makes you say that?" he asked.

"Haven't you any sense, or are you just pretending that you don't see things? We'll be together a lot, all right! Haven't you noticed, Caracol, how many times, when Morlen has me out on the range, Liseta Kaymore happens to come riding by on you?"

"I—I suppose so," Caracol admitted, feeling a twinge of jealousy.

"It'll be a bore, that affair," Hank confided. "They'll be taking long rides, just drifting along and making soft talk, and they'll never want to give us a run."

"Oh, it may not go that far!" Caracol said, hopefully. "By the way, have you noticed the change in the Big Boss?"

"Sure! Mr. Kaymore is a fine man," Hank replied. "I've heard Mart Morlen and his father talk about him often. I hope Mart stays on here, for I like the country."

"Why shouldn't he stay on?" Caracol asked. "Why should he give up a good job?"

"He really doesn't need a job like this," Hank explained. "Mart's got a lot of money his father left him. He sold the place up in Montana because a new railroad wanted to run through it, and they wanted to build a town on the old ranch. He was sick of Montana, anyhow."

"I didn't know that," Caracol said.

"Oh, yes! Mart Morlen could buy out the Bar K and not miss the money," Hank boasted. "I don't doubt he could buy the Double Box, too."

"Well, I hope you stay here," Caracol said. "Round-up isn't far off."

"That's the time!" said Hank. "I like round-ups. We had a great gang up in Montana, and a lot of fun."

"You'll like round-up down here, too," Caracol declared.

Then Caracol moved slowly away, being very polite about it, so he would not hurt Hank's feelings. He did not want to get too confidential with Hank. He liked Hank, but, after all, Hank was a newcomer, and Caracol did not want to discuss too much Bar K business with strangers.

But Hank followed him, seemingly determined to say more.

"When we were in town day before yesterday, I heard some men talking," Hank said. "That little affair at the Double Box, when Chris Dattock tried to make Liseta marry him—the story got out. Everybody on the range is laughing about it behind Chris Dattock's back."

"What of it?" Caracol asked. "He deserves it."

"Well, you know the sort of man Dattock is. He can't stand it to be laughed at. He may try to do something for revenge. If I was you, Caracol, I'd be mighty watchful when I was carrying Liseta around. You may

have to make a quick run for it some day."

Caracol lifted his head and sniffed. "I am always watchful when Liseta is in the saddle," he replied. "And I don't need any horse from Montana to tell me my business!"

"I didn't aim to make you mad," said Hank. "You're sure touchy to-day."

Caracol moved to the opposite side of the corral after that, and this time Hank let him go. Hank sensed that Caracol wished to be alone. And Caracol did. He was thinking of what Hank had said about Mart Morlen and Liseta. Well, it had to come sometime, Caracol supposed. A girl as pretty and fine as Liseta couldn't go on forever without some man roping her and putting his brand on her.

AS this was a rather warm, sleepy afternoon, and there seemed to be a dearth of activity around the Bar K, Liseta and her father were sitting on the porch. One of the punchers was puttering around the barn, and another was fussing with a guitar in the bunkhouse.

Mart Morlen had ridden up to the calf pasture to attend some sick stock there, using a string horse instead of Hank. Where Bobby was, Caracol did not know. He had ridden away early in the morning, supposedly to see whether there was a break in the fence up by the draw.

Caracol nosed a little bunch of hay that had been tossed over the corral fence, and decided that he would indulge in a light lunch just by way of passing the time. Once, when he lifted his head, he saw a rider coming easily down the lane toward the house. At that distance, Caracol could identify neither rider nor horse. He supposed it was one of the infrequent visitors from some other ranch or the town.

Sitting up on the porch, Liseta and her father saw the approaching rider also. They thought at first that it was Bobby, coming down from his tour of inspection in the hills. Then they realized that the horse was a strange one, and that the rider was strange, too.

Sam Kaymore experienced a feeling of impending disaster. He got out of his chair and went to the railing of the porch and waited there. Liseta joined him, stood beside him.

The rider came on down the lane. They could see, as he neared the porch, that he was riding a Double Box horse. Grimly, Sam Kaymore stood at the railing and waited. The horseman came to a stop directly beneath him, bowed to Liseta, and then looked at the Bar K's owner.

"You're Mr. Kaymore, ain't you?" he asked.

"I am. What's wanted?"

"I'm from the Double Box outfit, and I got a message for you."

"All right! Let's have it," Kaymore said.

"It ain't a written message, but a word-o'-mouth message," the Double Box man remarked, grinning a bit. "It's from Mr. Dattock, and you'd better pay some 'tention to it!"

"Are you trying to be insolent to me?" Kaymore thundered. "I'll have my men—"

"You wouldn't do nothin', I reckon," the other interrupted. "First off, I want a bundle o' Bobby Kaymore's clothes."

"What's that?" Kaymore gasped.

"You heard what I said! He's workin' for the Double Box now. Joined up with our outfit this mornin'. And he wants his clothes."

Liseta gave a little cry of mingled surprise and pain, and Kaymore's face turned white.

"I reckon maybe that your son didn't admire to work under the orders of a stranger and live in the bunkhouse," the Double Box man continued.

"He's workin' under a stranger and livin' in a bunkhouse now, ain't he?" Kaymore said. "So be it! The boy's of age. If he wants to work for another outfit, I can't help it. He c'n have his clothes."

"Oh, Dad!" Liseta cried.

"Hush, honey!" Kaymore implored.

"This ain't the time to think about it. I'll get some o' his clothes and make 'em into a bundle."

Kaymore turned to go into the house, but the Double Box man hailed him again.

"You ain't heard all o' the message I brought," he complained. "That's only the first part, and not the most important."

"What else have you got to say?"

"Please understand, Mr. Kaymore, that I ain't sayin' it at all. I'm only carryin' out my orders and tellin' you what Chris Dattock told me to remark."

"I understand. Let's have it!"

"Mr. Dattock says that he don't aim to be laughed about any more regardin' your daughter. So he's demandin' that she marry him, pronto."

"What's that?" Kaymore cried. "Why, I'll—"

"You won't lift a hand against me, Mr. Kaymore, if you're wise," the Double Box man put in, quickly. "Not if you think anything o' your son. If I don't get back to the Double Box safe, he'll suffer some."

"I—I—" Sam Kaymore sputtered helplessly.

"I reckon you'd better listen to the rest o' the message. Mr. Dattock says that the young lady must agree to marry him next Sunday, and make a big range affair of it at the Double Box ranch house. And she's got to act like she's tickled pink to do it."

"Is Dattock crazy?" Kaymore cried. "He might know that we'd refuse."

"I reckon you won't," said the Double Box man. "Here is the whole thing, sir—we've got your son workin' for us. Unless you agree—"

"If my son wants to work for Chris Dattock, I can't help it," Sam Kaymore interrupted. "But Dattock can't force my daughter to marry him!"

"Better wait till I get through, sir. As I said, your son's at our place. If you don't agree to the marriage, just as Chris Dattock wants everything, he's goin' to say—him and all the other men at our place—that we caught your boy with a runnin' iron, brandin' one o' the Double Box calves into a Bar K. You'll find him swingin' from the limb of a tree—"

"Oh!" Liseta cried. She understood the plot before her father did; saw the entire meaning of it.

"Why, you—" Sam Kaymore began.

"What answer am I to take to Chris Dattock?"

"You might know that without askin'," Kaymore replied. "My daughter wouldn't marry a thing like Chris Dattock no matter what the cost of her refusal!"

"Better think twice," the Double Box man said. "I wouldn't be too hasty, if I was you."

"There ain't any question o' haste," Kaymore told him. "The thing is unthinkable. I'll have Dattock run out o' the country!"

"That won't help your son any, and public sentiment might be with Dattock if everybody thought your Bobby was a rustler."

"No argument about it!" Kaymore cried. "Bobby got himself into this mess, and his sister ain't goin' to sacrifice herself."

"Wait, Dad!" Liseta implored. "As this man says, we don't want to be too hasty."

"But there ain't any two ways about it!" Kaymore protested. "You can't—"

"Please, Dad! Let me handle this a minute." She looked down at the Double Box man. "How soon does Mr. Dattock want his answer?" Liseta asked.

"He wants it pretty quick."

"But it—it's too important a thing to be decided in a minute," Liseta protested. "You must see that. I don't want to marry Chris Dattock, but I—I want to save my brother. Tell Mr. Dattock I'll give him an answer in the morning, early."

"Liseta!" her father cried. "Have you gone mad? There's only one possible answer."

"Please, Dad!" she implored.

"All right!" the Double Box rider called up to her. "I'll tell him you'll give him an answer in the mornin'. I reckon that'll be satisfactory to him. Just let one o' your punchers ride over and tell Dattock. Then you c'n make plans for the weddin'."

He wheeled his mount, lifted a hand in farewell, and rode down the lane toward the distant road.

CHAPTER XIII

At the Double Box

AS the darkness descended that evening, there was a conference in the Bar K ranch house. Sam Kaymore, Liseta, Mart Morlen, even the two Bar K punchers, were concerned in it. There had been a couple of hours of talk which had got them nowhere.

Mart Morlen took the middle of the floor and demanded attention.

"Bobby is a young ass," he announced. "The boy's all right only he hasn't got his balance yet. He'll make a fine man one o' these days. But this fool move of his has got us all into serious trouble. I'm goin' to handle him when we meet again. Nevertheless, the first thing is to get Bobby out o' the mess he's got himself into."

"Then what?" Kaymore asked.

"O' course, it's impossible for Liseta to even think o' doin' what that skunk wants her to do," Morlen went on to say. "No girl in her right senses could marry a man like Chris Dattock! We won't even think o' that."

"But what else can we do?" she cried. "Dattock will do as he threatens. It's Bobby's fault, but we—we just can't stand by and have them—" She broke down and was unable to continue her talk.

"Only one thing to do—get Bobby out o' there," Mart Morlen declared.

"And a fine chance you'd have o' doin' that!" Kaymore said. "There's Chris Dattock and Bill Garch, and about eight vaqueros, every one o' them as mean as poison!"

"I don't aim to gunfight the bunch unless it has to be done," Morlen said. "This here is a place for strategy."

"They've probably got Bobby where they c'n keep their eyes on him, too."

"Maybe he don't even know what they're intendin' to do," Morlen said. "Makes no difference. We got to get him back home."

"What you aim to do?" Kaymore asked.

"I'll take one o' the men—Haddick will do. I'll leave the other here on guard. Just what I'll do, I don't know. I'll decide that when I get there."

"I'm ready to go," the man Haddick said.

Liseta sprang to her feet and faced them. "You'll only run into some sort of trap!" she cried. "You—you'll be shot down. And Chris Dattock will be furious because you tried it, and make Bobby pay for it. There's only one way. I'll send him the answer he wants."

"Not while I'm alive!" her father shouted.

"Let me suggest," Morlen put in, "that Liseta keep out o' this. She ought to go to her own room and let us handle the affair. Don't you go to worryin' too much, Liseta. I reckon Haddick and me are men enough to engineer this here deal. We'll make the try, anyhow."

She refused at first, but presently she went to her room, weeping softly, and the men adjourned to the front porch to continue their conversation, where she could not hear.

"This thing has got to be handled with gloves," Morlen said. "If we make a mistake, Dattock might take it out on Bobby, like Liseta said. We've just got to get the boy away. We'll take an extra horse, so's we'll have it ready for him. Haddick and me—we c'n sneak up on the Double Box place and fuss around and get a line on things. Better start at once, so we'll have plenty time."

"Probably have to shoot our way out," Haddick commented, as though saying it possibly would rain before morning.

"You go in to Liseta, Mr. Kaymore, and tell her that we'll do our best," Morlen said. "Tell her not to cry and worry. And maybe you'd better bring us a lot of ammunition. We'll wait here on the porch."

Sam Kaymore hurried back into the house. A moment later, they heard his excited exclamation. He came rushing back to them.

"She tricked us—she's gone!" he cried. "Here's a note she left. It says, 'I'm going to see Chris Dattock and ask him to be human.'"

"That snake couldn't be human in a million years!" Morlen cried. "We've got to catch her."

He grabbed up a lantern from the porch and rushed to the corral with the others at his heels.

"Her pony's gone!" he cried, a moment later. "While we were talkin' on the porch, she got out the back way and got her pony and slipped down the lane."

"After her!" Sam Kaymore shouted. "Every man of us! If anything happens to Liseta—"

"Steady, Boss! That'd be just what they'd expect," Morlen said. "I'll go with Haddick, like we planned. Only difference is, we've got two to rescue now. If Liseta gets there first and is talkin' to Dattock, we might catch him off guard. You just stay here at home, Mr. Kaymore, and leave it to me."

There might have been more argument about it, but Morlen would waste no time in argument. He gave Haddick orders, and they got their ropes.

So Hank, Mart Morlen's horse, soon found himself with bridle and saddle on and ready for the trail. Hank wondered a bit about it as he was led out of the corral. He knew that Liseta Kaymore had slipped down to the corral and got Caracol, and that they had gone like shadows toward the lane.

While Sam Kaymore was still protesting that he wanted to go along, Morlen and Haddick left him and dashed down the lane toward the road. It was more than five miles to the Double Box, and they knew that Liseta was more than halfway there by this time, if she was riding at even an ordinary rate of speed. There was no chance of overtaking her.

They rode at a fair rate of speed for about two-thirds of the distance, and then Morlen brought Hank to a walk, and Haddick rode beside him.

"Moon's goin' to be up mighty soon," Morlen said. "From here on we'd better use our eyes and ears. Just before we get to the Double Box, we'll leave the trail."

They had an extra horse for use in case of necessity, as Mart Morlen had planned. There was no doubt in their minds now that Liseta had got to the Double Box. She probably would be in the ranch house, imploring Chris Dattock for mercy. But where Bobby Kaymore might be, they could not guess. They would have to locate both Bobby and Liseta, strike hard and quick, and trust to luck for a safe getaway.

The moon showed when they were still a mile from the Double Box. Morlen led the way off the main trail and down into the bottom of a dry watercourse, where they would not show up in silhouette. Slowly, cautiously, they made their way toward the ranch buildings, stopping now and then to listen.

The dry watercourse circled the Double Box barns and corrals. When they emerged from it, they were on the opposite side of the house, and in the midst of a field of large boulders, which caused shadows in which they could lose themselves.

Slipping from shadow to shadow, they neared the house. In a small depression in the earth, they stopped and dismounted, and tethered their mounts.

"Take your rope," Morlen whispered to Haddick. "You might need it."

They went on afoot, careful to make as little noise as possible. The distance was short, but every yard of it fraught with peril. If they were discovered, all hope of saving Liseta and Bobby would be gone.

They got through a fence and went on toward the house. Now they found plenty of shadows cast by shrubs and clumps of brush. The moon was getting higher, bathing the country in its soft glow. Whether it would prove a benefit or otherwise was a question.

Crouching at the end of the house, they watched and listened. They could hear Chris Dattock laughing and talking. Morlen got to the nearest window, raised himself cautiously, and peered into the big living room.

Liseta was walking back and forth in front of Chris Dattock, who sat sprawled in a chair, laughing at her. Morlen drew in his breath sharply when he saw her tear-stained cheeks, heard her pleading.

"Please—please let Bobby go," she begged.

"Sure, as soon as we're married," Chris Dattock told her, laughing again.

"Let us both go," she cried. "You don't want a wife who'd hate you."

"I don't want the folks o' this here range laughin' at me any more, either," Dattock said. "We won't have any argument about it, Liseta! You'll marry me to-morrow 'stead o' Sunday. I'll send in for a real preacher, and I'll get word to the folks so they c'n come to the weddin'. And then—then I'll 'tend to that Mart Morlen!"

"I'll do that!" another voice said.

Mart Morlen shifted his position so he could glance through the window from the opposite side. And then he saw that it was Bill Garch who had spoken, and that Dave Bencher was in the big room also. And in a chair, tied there, and his legs and arms lashed, was Bobby Kaymore. The reason Bobby did not join in his sister's plea was apparent—he was gagged. Evidently, he had been talking too much already.

CHAPTER XIV

Morlen Is Mean

MORLEN stepped back and held a conference with Haddick.

"Both of 'em are right there in that room," he concluded. "And we'll have Dattock and Bill Garch and Dave Bencher to contend with. They're probably all armed."

"Oh, it's simple!" Haddick said. "We bust in and grab Liseta and Bobby and bust right out again. We've got a horse for Bobby, but Liseta—"

"There's her pony, Caracol, standin' at the end o' the veranda," Morlen pointed out. "You reckon we might as well go into action now?"

"Sure and certain!"

"Suits me!"

They inspected their guns and then crept cautiously to the end of the veranda. Caracol was looking in the other direction, and did not betray their nearness by a snort of suspicion. Down in the bunkhouse, only a short distance away, Chris Dattock's vaqueros were talking and laughing.

It was the time for a swift, bold stroke. Hesitancy or delay might change the situation for the worse. Mart Morlen lifted his head cautiously and glanced the length of the veranda, to find a puncher sitting on the steps.

So Chris Dattock had a man on guard, Mart thought; this man was undoubtedly listening for sounds that would tell when somebody was coming down the lane. Dattock might have a couple more men in the neighborhood, too.

There was but one course for Haddick and Morlen to pursue, and they took it. Bending low, they crept along the veranda silently, creeping up upon their man. The last few feet were covered in a wild spring. Both Morlen and Haddick were upon him at the same instant. Morlen struck with the barrel of his six-gun.

The vaquero groaned once, and was still. The attack had not caused much noise. They pulled him down to the ground, and bound him swiftly with a section of Haddick's lariat.

Once more they watched and listened for a moment, and then they got upon the veranda and went to the front door. They could hear Liseta still

pleading and Chris Dattock laughing at her.

"Might as well," Haddick whispered, as though Morlen had asked him a question.

Morlen reached out and grasped the knob and turned it. The door was unlocked. He opened it cautiously for a few inches, and finally could peer into the room. Everybody in it was facing away from the door.

They sprang inside, slammed the door behind them.

"Put 'em up!" Morlen cried.

There was an instant of silence, save for the astonished gasps of those in the room, and the sound of men's boots as they turned swiftly. Then Liseta gave a little cry of surprise.

"Up! Pronto!" Morlen snapped.

He started to advance swiftly, with Haddick beside him. His attitude was menacing. An instant of delay in obeying his command meant trouble.

It was Bill Garch who cursed and went for his gun as he tried a rapid dash to one side. Dave Bencher was only an instant later. Chris Dattock sprang from his chair, jerking at his belt. Liseta sprang back against the wall.

Guns belched, flamed, bullets thudded. This fighting was swift and close. Morlen and Haddick had to strike quickly or not at all. The enemy did not know how many were back of these two.

Haddick's wild curse informed Morlen that he had been hit. But he continued shooting. Through the fog of smoke, Morlen saw Bill Garch go down. As he felt a bullet burn across his breast, he saw Dave Bencher drop his gun and pitch headlong to the floor. Dattock had retreated to the wall, was trying to capture Liseta and use her for a shield. Mart Morlen rushed straight at him, risking a fatal wound. His own gun spoke as Dattock's seemed to flame in his face. He felt another bullet burn across an arm.

The next instant he had whirled and was darting back to where Bobby Kaymore was tied to the chair. But Haddick was already at work there. His knife flashed, and the bonds were cut. The gag was jerked away, and Bobby was on his feet, hurrying toward the door, his sister beside him.

From the vicinity of the bunkhouse came a chorus of shouts as the men there sensed that something was wrong.

"Make it quick!" Morlen cried.

Then they were out on the veranda, were dashing down the steps as the vaqueros came running from the bunkhouse. Their guns cracked again to deter these new antagonists. Answering shots came, but none found a human target. In those uncertain shadows, accurate fire was impossible.

Morlen had been shouting at Liseta, and she understood. She dashed to Caracol and got into the saddle, wheeled her horse and put him at a low fence. Caracol cleared it, and Liseta was riding toward where the other horses waited.

Morlen, Haddick and Bobby Kaymore rushed through the shadows and got through the fence. Darting from rock to rock, from shrub to shrub, they made for the horses, sending a few shots toward the bewildered foe as they did so.

The Double Box men did not know exactly what had happened. They stopped at the veranda, and some of them rushed into the house. They emerged almost immediately with news of what had occurred. And then some went after the fugitives afoot, and others rushed to get mounts.

But Mart Morlen was on his horse by that time, and Bobby and Haddick were scrambling into their saddles. Morlen led the way along the lip of the watercourse until they reached a narrow trail. Down that they dashed toward the road.

There was no time for talk now, no time for anything except swift riding. They struck the road and turned toward the north. Morlen glanced over his shoulder to see the other three riding safely behind him.

When they came to the top of the first hill, Morlen slackened speed and let Liseta and Bobby pass him.

"Straight home!" he ordered. "And I don't want any cussed foolishness about it. Get goin'!"

He lagged behind a bit with Haddick. By the time they had come to the second hill, they knew that there was a pursuit. Liseta and Bobby were flying on ahead of them. Morlen slackened speed again, and Haddick did the same.

"We'll go into ambush at the next hill," Morlen said. "Them jaspers will turn back if we give 'em a few shots. With Dattock and Garch both out o' business, they'll probably hesitate before carryin' the fight very far. No good without leaders, that sort!"

And so when they came to the next high spot, they stopped and turned their mounts. The moonlight revealed four men coming after them. They did not seem to be riding with much enthusiasm. They had started hot on the trail, but their eagerness was dying out. They were thinking, undoubtedly, that they might be in for trouble if they acted on their own initiative, without the possibility of pleading later that they had been ordered by their employer to act.

When they were just within six-gun range, Morlen and Haddick emptied their guns at them. They scattered to either side of the trail. The Bar K men reloaded swiftly and sent a few more random shots down the hill. A few answered them, and then there was silence.

A moment of waiting, and then they saw the Double Box men in retreat. They watched for a time, and then turned up to the north trail again. There was nothing more to fear from the Double Box vaqueros.

"You hit bad?" Morlen asked, then.

"Left shoulder," Haddick reported. "Ain't nothin' much."

They said nothing more. At a fair rate of speed they went along the road, and finally turned into the Bar K lane. They could see that the front door of the house was open and that light was streaming out, that Kaymore and the puncher were welcoming Liseta and Bobby.

Morlen and Haddick stopped at the bottom of the porch steps.

"I don't think there'll be any more trouble," Morlen called up to them. "But one of us will stay awake to-night and listen around."

Then, without another word, and before Liseta or Bobby or Sam Kaymore could speak their thanks, he turned his Hank horse and made for the corral.

Their horses turned in, Haddick went to the bunkhouse to care for his wound, and Morlen put up the bars at the gate. Before he had finished, Liseta came running down to him.

"Oh, Mart!" she cried. "I—I'm so thankful!"

"Yeah?" Mart Morlen asked. "I never did see such a girl for doin' what she shouldn't do! Runnin' over to the Double Box and makin' our job just twice as hard! Anyhow, this is once you didn't come shootin' to my rescue. I'm hopin' that you'll go back to the house now, and behave!"

"Why—why, Mart!" she gasped.

"And tell Bobby to stay away from me till I get cooled down, or I'm liable to give him a couple o' black eyes."

"He—he's sorry," Liseta said.

"I betcha! The Old Man ought to make him roll up his blankets and ride. I never did see such a family. It's enough to make a man want to get out o' the country!"

"Why, Mart Morlen! I think you're mean!"

"See if I care!" Mart Morlen said.

CHAPTER XV

The Rope

IT was quite natural that Liseta Kaymore should sleep soundly that night, after the exhausting events of the day, and it was natural, also, that she should awake a little later than usual.

She heard voices as soon as she opened her eyes. Morlen and her father were talking out in the living room.

"Well, I'm sure glad that I met you, Mr. Kaymore," Mart Morlen was saying. "And now I'd better be on my way. I'll hit straight for town."

By the time Morlen had finished speaking, Liseta was out of her bed and trying to find her clothes. Mart Morlen was going away! He had told her father good-by, and he was riding without another word to her.

She supposed that he was disgusted with her for the way she had acted. It was true she had sneaked away and gone to the Double Box to plead with Chris Dattock. But everything had turned out all right.

She was trying to vindicate herself as she struggled into her riding clothes. Going straight to town, was he? She knew every foot of the range, and knew that by cutting over certain hills she could come into the Mesaburg trail and get ahead of him, if he rode at an ordinary rate of speed.

When she finally darted into the living room, she found that her father had disappeared and there was nobody else around. She went through the kitchen, almost upsetting the ancient Chinese cook in her haste. Outside the house, she saw her father and one of the men some distance away, and Bobby and the other puncher nowhere in sight.

Liseta rushed to the corral, calling to Caracol. She caught up the pony, put bridle and saddle on him, mounted, and galloped rapidly down toward the calf pasture.

"Where's that girl goin' now, I wonder?" her father said to the puncher.

Liseta "yip, yipped!" in Caracol's ear as she had in the good old days, and Caracol rejoiced. Because she seemed to ask it, he gave her all the speed possible. They went over a hill and struck a cow trail, and along that Caracol rushed.

Then there came a time when the pony was compelled to climb a treacherous slope slowly. It taxed his muscles and made him breathe heavily, but when they reached the summit Liseta let him rest. Caracol wondered where they were going. He and Hank had talked over the situation at dawn that morning, but before they had figured things out, Mart Morlen had come for Hank.

On they went again, Caracol pounding the hard earth gladly with his hooves. Down another hill, along a fairly good trail for a mile or so, and then Liseta brought him to a stop. Caracol looked around and sniffed.

He found that he was standing at the top of a ledge, and a few feet below him ran the trail to town. Liseta backed him a little and then remained quiet. But Caracol knew that she had her lariat in a loop and was swinging it.

Then he heard a horse's hooves pounding in the distance. He heard the voice of a man lifted in song. Glancing down the trail, he saw his new friend, Hank, bearing Mart Morlen along the road.

Liseta backed him a few feet more. Caracol knew that she was busy with the rope again, and braced himself. He could not see over the ledge now, but he heard Morlen approaching.

The rope swished through the air, and Caracol felt the shock as it was drawn taut. He heard Mart Morlen's muttered exclamation. Liseta's silvery laugh rang out.

"Don't shoot!" she cried.

"Liseta! You scared me half to death. Thought it was some hombre from the Double Box. I never did see such a girl."

Caracol was forced to the rim of the ledge again, and he looked down to find that the rope had landed neatly, that the noose held Mart Morlen's arms pinned to his sides. Liseta spoke to him, commanding that he keep the rope taut, then got out of the saddle and slid down the slope.

"So you were going away!" she said to Morlen.

"How's that?"

"You were disgusted with me, and I don't blame you. But I—I was so afraid for Bobby. I—I didn't mean to do something you didn't want me to do. I don't blame you for talking to me as you did last night."

Morlen looked bewildered for an instant, then grinned.

"Well, it was right down disgustin'," he replied.

"I heard you talking to Father. I heard you say you were glad you'd met him, but now you were going away, straight to town. So I cut across the hills and got ahead of you."

"Yeah?" Morlen asked.

"I—I've always said that—that when I saw the man I—I wanted for a husband, I'd shake out my lariat and rope him," Liseta remarked, her face flaming.

"That so?"

"And I—I don't want you to go away, Mart."

"You don't?"

"Well, if—if this is the way you're going to act, after I've acted like this myself—and as good as told you that I was—"

She hung her head, and Mart Morlen gently took the rope from around him and dropped it, got down out of the saddle, and stood directly in front of her.

"You look up here, Liseta," he commanded.

She looked up.

"So you thought I was goin' away, huh?"

"I heard you tell Dad—"

"You didn't hear all of it, I reckon. I'm only goin' to town to report what happened last night, and then on to the county seat on business. You see, Liseta, I'm buyin' a half share in the Bar K."

"You're what?" she cried.

"Yes'm. I like the country, and your dad likes me, and so we're goin' to be partners."

"That—that'll be fine."

"I reckon! Only goin' away for a couple o' days. Wanted to get the business settled. Have to send for my money. And then I was comin' straight back to you—honey!"

"What—did you call me?" Liseta asked.

"You heard me!"

She looked him straight in the eyes for an instant, and then he opened his arms. Liseta snuggled into them, lifted her lips for his kiss. She had roped her man, as she always had said she would do.

At that moment Caracol happened to glance down and meet the eye of Hank. Solemnly, Hank winked.

Sweepstakes

By L. Lindley Mulkey

Sweepstakes! So much depended on the winning—for Reta. She couldn't guess what the outcome would be, or know that a glorious girl like herself held trump cards—no matter what happened—in the game of life and love.

TO Reta Ralston the sea of faces about the judging ring was a blur. This was the day, this was the hour, toward which she had been working for the last two years. To her, the only figure possessing reality was the tall one of Trowbridge Scott in the center of the ring—Trowbridge Scott, who was considered the best judge of beef stock in the West. There was a murmur among the crowd as Scott waved Tad Nelson of the Diamond D aside. How did Tad ever imagine he could "place" with that scrawny Hereford!

"You're next, Miss Ralston," someone called.

A wave of applause swept the spectators, as Reta started toward the ring center leading Prince Lovering. The girl's head was high with pride, her eyes dark pools of excitement, her slender little figure trim as a boy's, in whipcords and high boots. Close-

cropped black hair curled about her sun-browned face, and the sweet mouth which could be so merry and at other times so firm, was just now curved into a smile of confidence. The pure-bred two-year-old which she led was a beautiful specimen of bovine royalty—broad of chest, wide of eye, and with a silky coat of deepest red.

The crowd hushed and only the outside noises incident to a big state fair could be heard as Trowbridge Scott went over Prince Lovering point by point. Reta waited his verdict breathlessly.

Prince Lovering would win! She knew he would! And then that five thousand dollars from the governor's sweepstakes would be hers.

There flashed before her mind's eye a picture of the new ranch house she intended building on the Triple T with that five thousand—up-to-date, running water, bath, fireplace. Oh, it would be one to warm the heart of Mom Ralston. Mom had known only the bare comfort of sod houses and frame shanties in all her years of range life. Dad Ralston had planned to build the house four years ago but that was the winter of the big blizzard, when half the Ralston herd had been lost and Dad, himself, had given his life in a futile effort to save them.

Reta was recalled to her surroundings by the voice of Trowbridge Scott. "You've got a mighty nice two-year-old here, Miss Ralston. Reckon you better step to one side and I'll take him again in the last judging."

The girl's heart felt as if it would burst with its mad thumping. Scott had put her in the final group! It was one more step toward that five thousand! The crowd again applauded as they heard the judge's decision. Ranchers from every part of the state were there, men who appreciated fine cattle and gave such fineness its due.

A number of entries followed Reta, only to be waved out of the ring by Trowbridge Scott, and then came a commotion among the spectators, a murmur which steadily increased to a babble of excited ejaculations. The crowd divided to allow the entry of a tall young man in scarred chaps and leather vest.

Reta's eyes swept him swiftly—thick blond hair, lean, sun-tanned face, steady gray eyes and a firmness in the line of jaw which was relieved only by the quirking grin about a wide, good-humored mouth. The girl's glance passed on to the animal which the young man led, and stopped there in consternation. If Prince Lovering was beautiful, here was perfection!

"Dent Ferguson—owner of King Boris," called the announcer.

Dent Ferguson! Reta's new neighbor who had bought the old Twin Springs place next to the Triple T, two months ago. Reta had seen nothing of the man, possibly because he had been busy bringing his cattle up from some point in the southern part of the state, but Paddy Burns, her old foreman, had given a brief and vivid description of Ferguson.

"One o' them dude ranchers—yes, sir—plumb edicated he is—graduated from some hifalutin' agriculture collige! Reckon he aims to teach us pore benighted ranchers how to shag cattle scientific!"

At the time, Reta had formed no very complimentary opinion of the new neighbor. And here he was in the stock ring with his King Boris. Reta looked the animal over curiously, her pulses leaping in a curious excitement. Could it be that Prince Lovering would find in this newcomer a rival for the governor's sweepstakes? But Reta's chin lifted confidently. It couldn't be—her two-year-old would win!

The girl kept to her firm belief during the rest of the preliminary judging, at the end of which only King Boris, Prince Lovering and two others were admitted to the finals for the big prize. There was a hush as Trowbridge Scott started once more judging the animals, comparing them point by point and noting down the results.

Nearby stood a helper with the coveted ribbons in his hand, a purple rosette for the champion, a red satin ribbon for the animal taking second place and a white one for third. Reta could see Paddy Burns at the edge of the crowd, gnawing the ends of his mustache. Why didn't they hurry—

Trowbridge Scott was motioning to his helper; there was a moment of tense silence, then a burst of applause as the purple rosette, representing first place, was fastened to the halter strap of King Boris.

A wave of actual nausea swept Reta as the red ribbon was attached to Prince Lovering. Second place! Her fingers were numb as they closed about the four-hundred-dollar check which represented second money. Dent Ferguson and his King Boris had won the governor's sweepstakes! Suddenly Reta hated Ferguson with all the strength of her vibrant young soul. Mom—Mom—couldn't have her new house—

"Sorry, Miss Ralston—you certainly gave me some stiff competition."

It was Dent Ferguson addressing her, a quizzical smile in his gray eyes. Reta's chin lifted, as she regarded the man coldly.

"It doesn't matter," she answered, white-faced but forcing her voice to steadiness. Then, tossing Prince Lovering's halter strap to Paddy Burns, she turned and abruptly left the ring.

It was two weeks later that Reta again met her new neighbor. The girl's heart was still sore from the defeat which had been hers at the state fair. Had the outcome of it affected only herself, she would have swallowed her disappointment and determined to win next time. But she had been so sure of winning and had actually promised Mom that new house. Somehow, it seemed as if Dent Ferguson had deliberately filched it from her, and yet she was fair enough to realize that he had met her in open competition.

On this particular day, Reta had gone into the lower pasture for the purpose of corralling some eight or ten calves. The young animals, wild as deer, were giving her considerable trouble and it was just as her rope missed one of them that she looked up and saw Dent Ferguson watching her from the other side of the fence. Had she been closer, she might have heard his exclamation of surprise as his eyes lighted on her buckskin pony.

"Well, if it's not that pie-eyed little Pats that was stolen from me down in the basin six months ago! Where'd Reta Ralston get him! Wonder if he remembers me—"

Reta, piqued that Dent Ferguson should see her miss her throw, circled up close to the fence and built another loop.

"That buckskin'll handle easier if you throw your weight the way you want him to turn," the young rancher offered.

Instantly to Reta's mind came Paddy Burns' sarcastic remark, "Plumb edicated—reckon he aims to teach us how to shag cattle scientific—"

And here he was offering pointers on the handling of a horse!

"Did you learn all that in college?" Reta asked sweetly, in answer to his advice.

Dent Ferguson's face flushed, but his gray eyes held hers. "I hate to see a well trained horse mishandled, that's all."

Mishandled! Nothing he could have said would have made Reta angrier. "Suppose you let me handle him the way I please," she answered icily. "I happen to know this horse better than you do."

Suddenly Dent Ferguson grinned. "That so?"

Reta was furious at the man's coolness. She wanted terribly to say something that would cut him to the quick, but since she could think of nothing, she contented herself with wheeling the buckskin and dashing off across the pasture toward home.

Suddenly from behind her sounded a shrill clear whistle, beginning on a

high note and descending swiftly in a little trill, almost like the call of a bird.

And all at once, to Reta's amazement, the buckskin whirled and started back toward the fence and Dent Ferguson. The girl pulled frantically on the reins, and this failing, dug in her spurs. But the buckskin paid no attention until he was back at the fence and whinnying softly to the grinning young man on the other side.

Reta's face was white with anger and chagrin. To be carried back against her will to confront the chuckling Ferguson!

"Listen, Miss Ralston, please. I wanted to see you to-day about the—"

"Nothing you wanted to see me about would interest me in the least, Mr. Ferguson," the girl answered furiously. Once more she wheeled the buckskin, dug in her spurs and sent him flying toward home.

But once again came the shrill, whistled call. Once more the buckskin stopped, in spite of all Reta could do, and trotted anxiously back to the fence. Tears of rage stood in the girl's eyes.

"How — how — dare you—" she choked.

"Miss Ralston, I'm trying to interest the ranchers in this locality in forming an association for the marketing of our beef. We'd all benefit through fairer prices and by being able to pass up these individual cattle buyers—"

Although the girl knew such an association was a wise move on the part of the ranchers, she would not have joined for a million dollars, since Dent Ferguson was the head of it. In her anger, she was past all reasoning.

"So, you've started right in to teach the rest of us how to raise and handle beef," she said cuttingly. "Sorry, Professor, I'm too busy this morning—"

"But Miss Ralston—"

"Hire a hall!" the girl flung over her shoulder and once more turned the buckskin toward home.

This time he let her go. As the young man speculatively lighted a cigarette and watched her erect little figure pass from sight around the brow of a hill, his eyes held an expression of almost small-boy wistfulness.

"I'm sure poison-ivy to that little lady," he mused. "And I'd rather have her for a friend than anybody else in this whole valley."

The weeks which followed were filled with ranch routine for Reta. Mrs. Ralston, a semi-invalid, took little interest in the management of the ranch, much preferring to leave things in Reta's capabale young hands. The girl had seen nothing of Ferguson since that day in the lower pasture and knew of his doings only through the reports of old Paddy Burns.

It seemed that Ferguson had gotten the other ranchers in the valley to form the association and they had all contracted their beef to some big Chicago firm for twelve cents on foot. Most of them would begin shipping in another month. If Reta secretly wished she were in the association with the men in the valley—men whom she had known since childhood as being cattle-wise and price canny—she let no one suspect it. Her chin set a little more firmly, as she mentally determined to stay off Ferguson's bandwagon. She'd play her own hand without any help or advice from that hombre.

It was late in October when her outfit finished the round-up of her cattle. Due to the fact that her hay crop had been short and that she must count on at least two months of winter feeding, it would be necessary to sell off more stock than usual.

Reta had already contracted for additional hay and must meet this expense from her beef check. Better a small herd well wintered than the chance of running out of feed with a larger bunch. She could always pick up feeders in the spring when grass was plentiful, and make a profit on them.

As yet no buyer had called at the ranch but Reta felt sure it would be but a matter of days until one arrived.

She'd keep her marketable steers in the lower pasture and at least have them ready. At present, quotations were a little better than the association had received, and Reta secretly hoped to take advantage of this.

IT was early one Monday morning that a swarthy individual rode up to the corral and asked for the boss of the Triple T. His black eyes and a heavy black mustache were the most noticeable features about a fat, oily face.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Sagassa," Paddy Burns greeted the man civilly. "Reckon ye'll find Miss Reta up at the house."

"Fine! I jest dropped by to make her an offer on her beef." Then, glancing at the buckskin inside the corral, he added, "I see Miss Reta still has the hoss I sold her last April."

"Ye-ah—she sets a heap o' store by thet little cow-pony," Paddy agreed. "Rides him altogether—"

"Well, I give her a good buy on him. Maybe she'll remember and deal me her cattle."

"You'll always find Miss Reta fair and reasonable, Mr. Sagassa," Paddy answered.

Ten minutes later, the buyer and the pretty young boss of the Triple T rode out to the lower pasture where Reta's beef cattle grazed peacefully in the autumn sunshine. The girl's heart filled with pride as she surveyed the sleek young steers and she was much gratified when Sagassa offered top price—a good two cents higher than the association men had contracted for.

"Of course, Miss Reta, that's the price loaded. I've got a string o' cattle cars on the sidin' down at the junction, now. You hev yore outfit load this stuff soon as possible; then I'll give you a check fer twenty-eight hundred."

"That's fair enough, Mr. Sagassa."

"My check'll be drawn on the Northwestern Bank o' Shaw City," the buyer continued, his eyes watching the girl narrowly. "You might call 'em up to make sure the money's there and thet everything's all right."

"Why—why—I hadn't thought of that. But if you'd rather I did—" the girl hesitated.

Sagassa chuckled heartily. "Well, do's you like. I know you ladies ain't allus up on the ways o' business and I thought it might make you feel safer. Nobody kin ever say I took advantage of a woman."

TWO days later saw Reta's steers on the cars and ready to start their long journey to market. Sagassa had living quarters fixed up in the end of one car and would accompany them, thus saving the pay of a caretaker. Since practically all the other ranchers in the valley belonged to the association, he would go north for further buying.

Reta had ridden down to the junction to oversee the work and, as the last steer was loaded, Sagassa came over to where she sat her buckskin pony.

"Reckon yer ready fer thet check now, Miss Reta," he said ingratiatingly.

Reta smiled. "Of course, twenty-eight hundred would come in mighty handy to most of us."

"I'll say it would!" Sagassa chuckled. He drew a fountain pen and check book from his vest pocket, flattened the book against Reta's saddle, and wrote busily. He tore the check from the stub, held it a moment in the strong sunlight to dry, and handed it to the girl.

"Now, if you'll jest give me a receipt fer payment on them steers, we'll be all set," he grinned.

"Won't your canceled check be a receipt?" Reta asked.

"Well, yes, it would," Sagassa returned. "But with me travelin' round like I hev to in buyin' I git careless about sech things. If I hev a regular receipt besides the check, I'm bound not to loose both of 'em."

It was only business and Reta realized the man had a perfect right to ask

for a receipt. She glanced at the check, saw that it was made out and signed properly, and slipped it into the pocket of her blouse.

"If you'll tear a sheet from your notebook and lend me that pen, I'll be glad to," she offered.

"Here's a reg'lar form," Sagassa answered, producing a pad of blank receipts. "I allus carry 'em with me so's to have 'em handy." He was working with the pen. "Confound it, the thing's dry—well, here's an indelible pencil thet'll do jest as well."

As Sagassa folded the receipt and slipped it into his purse, Reta headed her buckskin toward Shaw City. She'd deposit the check and be in a position to pay her hay bill when it came in the last of the week.

It was but natural that the girl should experience a feeling of satisfaction at having gotten a better price for her steers than any of the association ranchers under the leadership of Dent Ferguson. He might show the others how to sell beef, but she'd manage alone. From behind her came the shrill whistle of the afternoon freight as it left the junction. It had picked up the cattle cars, and her steers, with their new owner, were speeding toward the state line.

As she stood there, there came a horseman, around a bend in the road ahead. As he drew nearer, Reta's heart suddenly pounded in exultation. Dent Ferguson! His horse was coming at an easy lope but slowed as he drew near. And then, to Reta's chagrin, the buckskin she was riding stopped directly in the path of the other. Ferguson lifted his hat gravely and drew rein.

"You wanted to speak to me—?" he questioned hesitantly.

For a moment Reta's face flamed. "No," she answered, "my horse just stopped. Does the hypnosis you seem to exert over the entire valley extend even to the animals?"

Ferguson grinned and Reta could not but notice the eager friendliness of his eyes. If she hadn't hated him so—

"No, Miss Ralston; to tell the truth, I used to own that little buckskin you're riding. But—but—I sold him—"

One really couldn't tell a pretty girl that the horse she was riding had been stolen from one, nor that the buckskin had been a special pet and he'd rather she had him than anyone else in the world.

"So that's why he answered your whistle!"

"Well, yes— You see I just wondered if he'd remember me. By the way, who'd you get him from?"

"A Mr. Sagassa—a cattle buyer—who came past the Triple T last spring." She saw Dent Ferguson's eyes suddenly turn the color of chilled steel.

"You—deal with that hombre?" he asked quietly.

"Indeed I do," Reta couldn't keep the little note of triumph from her voice. "Especially when he gives me two cents more on foot than your association receives. I'm on my way now to bank his check in Shaw City."

"Miss Ralston, do you mind letting me see the check?"

So he didn't believe her; didn't believe that a girl was cannier than his precious association! Her hand slipped to the pocket of her blouse and drew forth Sagassa's check. A little smile of triumph curled her lips as she unfolded it.

Suddenly the smile was wiped from Reta's face. All the blood in her body seemed to congeal about her heart. She stared, unbelieving. The check in her hand was absolutely blank!

"Why—why—"

Ferguson spurred closer. His mouth was compressed in a straight line. "Sagassa gave you that check?" he questioned.

Reta brushed a hand across her eyes in bewilderment. "I—I don't—understand," she faltered. "The check was all right when he handed it to me."

Dent Ferguson leaned over and took the paper from her trembling fingers, scanning it closely. "Yes, I reckon it was," he said slowly. "Did you give

him a receipt for payment, Miss Ralston?"

The girl nodded inarticulately. "I had phoned the bank and the money was there all right." She briefly sketched the incident at the junction, when Sagassa had written the check and she had given him the receipt. "And my steers are—already gone—" Reta finished.

"Quick, Miss Ralston!" Dent Ferguson had galvanized into a whirlwind of activity. "That train'll have to wait for the through Eastern one at El Centro. If we hurry, we can cut across the Wasco Hills and beat it to Big Falls."

The next moment they were racing side by side toward the low hills to the north. Reta's thoughts were a riot of doubt, fear and incredulity. How could the blank check have gotten into her pocket instead of the one which Sagassa had written? Was it just a mistake, or had he deliberately cheated her? He had her receipt—could they make him pay again?

Dent Ferguson rode with his eyes straight ahead, his lean jaw set in granite lines. Reta could not but note the clean length of him, giving easily to the movement of his horse. He seemed lost in thought, utterly oblivious to her presence.

Suddenly Reta felt ashamed of her past treatment of the man. Never had she missed a chance to be rude to him, and yet he had not hesitated to come to her aid at a moment's notice.

Well, she thought bitterly, if it turned out that her antagonism, born in the judging ring and nursed through the fall season, had cost her twenty-eight hundred dollars, he would be in a position to laugh heartily at her expense. Yet, behind Reta's bitterness was a real worry, for she could not afford to lose twenty-eight hundred dollars at this time. She needed that money desperately in order to carry the rest of her cattle through the winter feeding.

Arrived at Great Falls, Ferguson headed straight to the sheriff's office. The stock train would be along in about fifteen minutes, but they must have some semblance of official backing in order to hold the train.

"Ye say he's got a signed receipt showin' payment fer them cattle?" the grizzled old sheriff questioned.

"Yes, and all Miss Ralston has to show for the transaction is a blank check," snapped Ferguson.

"Wal, I cain't hardly see whar ye kin git him on the deal—"

"We'll get him, all right," Ferguson announced grimly. "What I need you for is to impress the train crew."

There came a long-drawn shriek from a locomotive and the three hurried to the depot, arriving there just as the stock train rumbled to a stop. Sheriff Barton stepped up to the engine cab and displayed his star to the engineer and fireman, while Ferguson, followed by Reta, made for the car in which Sagassa had his quarters.

They found the oily-faced buyer bending over a rough table in one end of the car, evidently casting up accounts.

"Howdy, Sagassa, we'd like a word or two with you."

The buyer whirled and his face turned a pasty white as he beheld Dent Ferguson in the doorway. Suddenly his hand slid toward the open drawer of the table.

"No you don't, Sagassa!" Almost as if by magic, Ferguson's gun had appeared in his hand. "Just stand there by that window. Our business won't take long. First of all, hand over that receipt Miss Ralston gave you for payment of those steers."

"What is this—a hold-up?" the other blustered.

"No," chuckled Ferguson, "it's what you might call a showdown."

"I bought and paid fer them steers. What's the gal howlin' about?"

"Ye-ah—paid for them with a check written in disappearing ink! Queer how your pen suddenly went dry when Miss Ralston wanted to borrow it to

write your receipt. Now just oblige us with that little document, if you please."

Sagassa looked like a trapped coyote, fuming, snarling. But he slowly drew Reta's receipt from his pocket and tossed it at Dent Ferguson's feet.

"Will you see if that's the one you gave him, Miss Ralston?" And when the girl had nodded affirmation, Ferguson prodded the cursing buyer to the door. "Now, Sagassa, you leave this train and if you ever show up in this valley again I'll turn you over to the sheriff for—well, you know what.

"By the way, I'm right glad you sold Miss Ralston the little buckskin you 'bought' from me the last time you were down in the basin. Don't know of anyone I'd rather have own him," Ferguson finished meaningly.

He turned from the door to smile at the white-faced girl. Reta was slowly tearing her receipt into tiny shreds and letting them slide through trembling fingers to the floor.

"Miss Ralston, you've got your steers all loaded and you will suffer a certain loss if they don't go on the market now. If you like, I think we can arrange with the Chicago firm that the association dealt with, to take them off your hands. Their price is two cents lower than Sagassa's—but you'll get your money."

Reta Ralston looked the young man squarely in the eye. Her chin lifted with a quiet dignity in keeping with the fearlessness in her face.

"You're a square-shooter, Dent Ferguson," she said steadily. "I reckon I'd be glad to deal with the Chicago firm and—and I'd be right proud to join your association—if—if you still want me."

"Want you! I'll say we do!" The enthusiasm in the young rancher's voice was much-needed balm to the soreness in the girl's heart.

As they made their way outside to where their horses stood, Dent Ferguson returned to the business at hand. "I'll stay here with the stock and look after them, while you ride back to the Triple T and send one of your outfit to take them on to Chicago."

"But—but—Mr. Ferguson, how did you guess about the disappearing ink?" Reta asked wonderingly.

"Oh, that," answered Dent Ferguson, while a teasing twinkle shone in his eyes; "that's just something I learned in college—chemical lab—"

Suddenly the tears swam in Reta's eyes. She brushed at them furiously and rushed to where the little buckskin stood. She deserved that dig—but she couldn't bear it—anything to get away! A moment and she had mounted, turning the pony's head toward home.

All at once from behind her there came a shrill, whistled call and the buckskin dutifully turned and carried her back to Dent Ferguson.

"Oh, Reta, honey, I didn't mean that." He was all contrition. "It was rotten of me—"

"I—deserved it."

"No you didn't. Oh, Reta—can't we be friends? No, darn it, I don't mean friends. Won't you marry me? That five thousand from the governor's sweepstakes—I haven't spent a cent of it. I've been hoping some day maybe you'd stop hating me and we'd build an up-to-date ranch house on the line between the Triple T and the Twin Springs—"

He stopped to scan her face anxiously. Suddenly a smile curved Reta's lips and two dimples appeared in her cheeks.

"Mom's been wanting a new house—"

"Say, Reta honey, we'll build one that'll make Mom's eyes pop! Water, and bath, and a fireplace—"

Reta's sweeping lashes fluttered, and the eyes she raised to his were luminous with something more than gratitude. Dent's arms reached for her. But the girl, suddenly aware of the interested train crew, whispered a soft "to-morrow" and wheeled the buckskin toward home.

Dent chuckled happily, and this time he let her go.

Dale's Dilemma

By Herbert A. Woodbury

In the springtime a cowboy's fancy will always turn toward a little ranch-home and a pretty girl to share it with him. There was Peggy who was an ideal partner and Beth, who'd make a perfect wife. It's sure hard to guess which one is going to be his smiling bride.

BRIGHT sunlight of late May flooded the ample arena at Hassayampa. It brought out the rich, tawny hues of the desert hills in the background. It glimmered in the brilliant carnival trappings of the thousands who filled the stands. It sparkled in the silver conchas of the scores who crowded the field.

More especially, it got into the eyes of Dale Treynor at just the moment when he launched a pile-driving blow toward the tip of Bud Ellis' chin. The puncher's blow missed, and he all but lost his footing. Bud banged him on the side of the jaw. Another Diamond waddy clipped him from the opposite side, and then Dale commenced to feel dizzy.

But the six of them hadn't licked him yet; not by a long shot. His body crouched in battling stance, his great

arms weaving, Dale backed slowly away under the avalanche of overwhelming numbers. They were a maniac crew, these boys of the Diamond. Dale necessarily had little time for reflection, but it struck him that this concerted gang attack was entirely out of proportion to what he had done.

Why, he'd merely put some burrs under the harnesses of a couple of the ponies attached to the ancient stage coach which the Diamond had counted on parading round the field, and all that had happened was that the ponies had bucked and run away and smashed the stage coach. Nobody killed or anything. Some folks just couldn't take a joke.

Once more, two Diamond punchers landed blows at the same time. Dale staggered on rubbery knees. And then, just as he expected the murder to take place, the boys of the Diamond beat a hasty retreat.

It wasn't a rescue, exactly. The men who jostled his attackers aside were all deputies, and at their head was Mike Cummings, the sheriff himself.

Words that were somehow old and familiar rang in Dale's ears. "Hombre, you're under arrest!"

Dale struggled painfully to his feet. "Yes sir," he submitted.

He wasn't looking at the sheriff as he said it—he was gazing past the man into the crowd which had gathered round. First of all he saw his employer's daughter, Peggy. Peggy was eighteen, pert and freckled and saucy. On more than one occasion in the past six months of his hectic stay at the Bar D, Dale had thought Peggy the most enchanting creature in the whole world.

Like himself, Peggy, too, had been born under a restless star. She had been an ideal partner for—well, capturing her father's white leghorns, for instance, and hiding them in the foreman's shack. For mad lopes across the desert, or for anything else that was breathless.

His eyes shifted a bit to the right of Peggy, and he beheld Beth Hughes, the new school teacher, here at Hassayampa. Beth, too, had come in for a share of Dale's attentions, recently. Beth was pretty as a picture. Blue-eyed and blond, quiet and serious, was Beth.

Dale looked from one to the other and then back again. Peggy was holding her pert, snubbed little nose high in the air in unmistakable disdain, while Beth, for her part, was smiling. Beth's blue eyes were soft in sympathy.

The puncher puckered his forehead. He scratched his mop of disheveled black hair. Now here was a situation that was plumb puzzling. You'd expect, somehow, that the mischievous Peg would be doing the grinning, and that the serious Beth would be shocked. Yet it was precisely the other way round!

Now, how—how in blazes did you figure that? Dale, who had been trying for weeks to decide which of the two girls he preferred, was worried.

A VOICE jarred the puncher out of his reverie. The sheriff was saying, "Git on your hoss, cowboy. And pronto."

Dale obeyed with what speed his injuries permitted. And six deputies closed in about him in a hollow square. A moment later and the cavalcade left the arena by the south gate. After a half hour's jog through a gaudy succession of palo verdes, mesquite and greasewood, it wound up at the town magistrate's.

Dale found himself sentenced to ten days for disturbing the peace, but with the usual proviso in his sentence that he would go free if his employer would take him back to the Bar D and promise to keep him safely out of Hassayampa for at least a month.

Dale grinned sheepishly. Bill McDonnell would be in, late this evening or first thing to-morrow morning, to make the proper arrangements. After that he'd ride back to the Bar D with Peg, as usual.

Alas for Dale, however. Succeeding events were anything but usual.

Two whole days passed without the customary reprieve, and on the third, the turnkey handed Dale a short, penciled note from Bill. It said, curtly:

> I've brought your saddle and your duffel in and left them with the sheriff. When your time is up, he'll give them to you. Bill.

Fired, in other words! For the—he'd lost count, really.

"One thing, though," he told himself, "I ain't gittin' fired quite so frequent, these days. Have been six whole months with Bill, which is pretty danged good—"

He frowned thoughtfully and stared at the floor. He was improving, he reckoned, at that. One of these days he'd probably get fired for the last time and settle down.

In fact, truth to tell, Dale had been dallying pleasantly with the thought of settling down, for the past month. He had been dreaming, as young males are apt to in the spring, of a rose-covered cottage dozing in the warmth of some bright canyon. The only trouble was, whom to invite to share that cottage—Peggy or Beth.

"If I could only answer that question," thought Dale, "then by dang, I would settle down. But when they're both beautiful an' both lovely, what in heck's a guy to do?"

FATE possibly heard the puncher's plea, for on the fourth day of Dale's enforced vacation from the saddle, the man's keeper came in smacking his lips.

"Lady to see you, out there," said the turnkey, "an' believe me, she's a knockout."

Dale sprang eagerly to his feet. One of the girls, then, had taken pity upon him. Mightn't that girl be the right girl?

He followed the turnkey out into an antechamber adjoining the magistrate's office, and flushed joyfully as he beheld—Beth! There she sat in a chair over by the window, where the bright sunlight turned all the lovely blond tints of her hair to live gold. Her blue eyes met his, soft as they had been that day at the arena.

"Come over here and sit down, Dale," she invited. "I want to have a good long talk with you."

A little breathlessly, Dale obeyed, since his whole future happiness, possibly, hung in the balance.

He sat down across from Beth, and the girl hitched her chair up to his. Then she bent forward until her face was only a half-dozen inches away from his own.

"Dale," she commenced, "I don't think you're *really* bad—"

Dale flushed at faith so exquisite, and Beth went on.

"Because," said the school teacher, "*nobody's* really bad. People are just, well—" It was slightly complicated, in a way, but Beth's idea seemed to be that the wicked in this world are simply victims of society and circumstances—that even the most desperate can be saved by a helping hand at the right moment.

She was a radiant apostle of sweetness and light, of charity and lofty thoughts. Dale's mind wandered a little as she talked abstractly of the psychology and sociology she had learned from her courses at Teachers' College.

But his attention returned with a bang, when she said, "Now take you, for instance. You're a *most* interesting specimen."

"Um, er what?" queried Dale.

"I mean," said Beth, "that in the proper environment, you could amount to something."

Such confidence in him warmed Dale's heart. "I—I reckon I could," he said.

"And so," Beth went on, "I've asked the magistrate to parole you into my charge."

The puncher's eyes lit up in swift gratitude. Jails were always so de-

pressing to a gent who loved the wide sweeps of desert and the rugged gauntness of hills.

"That's sure danged nice of you," he said.

"And what's more," Beth told him, "I've got you a new job, too."

Dale's heart bounded again. Gratitude overwhelmed him.

"In the bank," she concluded.

For a tiny second, Dale's face fell. "In the bank?" he stammered.

"As a guard," smiled Beth. "Mr. Wells was saying that with all these bandit raids lately, he thought he ought to be prepared."

"I know," said Dale. "But wouldn't it be better, maybe, if I got Mike Cummings to make me deputy? Then I could get your bandits, and—and ride, too."

"The idea," said Beth, "isn't entirely to get bandits. It's to amount to something, Dale. You'll only be a guard for a little while. As soon as there's a vacancy, Mr. Wells will promote you. Give you a job in one of the tellers' cages. And then—"

Somehow, Beth's face was so flushed and eager that the puncher didn't find it in his heart to dash her hopes. After all, it would have been sheer ingratitude to tell a girl who'd gone to all this trouble for you that you had no such high-falutin' ambitions, that cows were your work, and that life anywhere but on the range would be difficult.

Dale voiced no opposition, then. He took one of Beth's soft hands in his own, and patted it. He felt very tender and happy and content. More than that. He felt already a better man. An idea crashed dizzily through his brain. Why wasn't Beth, with those fine ideals of hers, the girl for him? She'd keep an hombre from slipping, all right!

It was an idea which grew as they left the jail and strolled up the street under the umbrella trees. Dale commenced to grow tingly and warm inside. He'd never felt quite like this before, so all up in the clouds and treading on air and full of noble sentiments.

He checked this feeling against all the stories he had ever read, and decided that the symptoms admitted of only one conclusion. He was in love with Beth! As he dallied with the sweet thought for one long blissful moment, he wondered suddenly why it had taken him so long to make up his mind.

Why, indeed?

THE answer to the question, incidentally, was just swinging off a pinto pony under the cottonwood trees in the vacant lot behind Boardman's General Store. Peggy McDonnell, slim and boyish and grinning, tied up her horse and then shot an impatient glance at her father.

"Come on, Dad," she admonished.

Her father surveyed her green silk blouse, her smart buckskin skirt and her best Sunday boots, and the old man twinkled at such unusual finery. Peggy usually loped the hills in a pair of faded blue jeans and a man's blue shirt.

"Not gittin' impatient, are you?" Bill wanted to know. "Where's the girl that was gonna let him stay in for his full ten days?"

Peggy flushed guiltily.

"I—I didn't know ten days was going to be so long," she confessed. "And—and anyway, Dad, I reckon four's enough to—"

"To what?" asked her dad. And then when Peggy flushed again, and refused to answer, the old man chuckled. Little minx, he knew. Peggy'd been plotting. Trying to scare Dale with the prospect of losing her, so that when she finally did come in to him, he'd be properly contrite. Pour out his soul, so to speak, and maybe tell her all the things she'd been waiting so breathlessly to hear.

Bill McDonnell didn't require three guesses to realize that his daughter was in love, and what's more, Bill heartily approved. Dale was full of mischief, to be sure—but then, so was Peg. Looking on life with the wisdom of fifty,

Bill realized that in the long run we're happiest when we marry natures akin to our own.

He finished tying his own horse, and then caught his daughter's arm. They hurried through the store to the street. And then, abruptly, the two of them stopped short.

There, a little way down the sidewalk, came Dale and Beth. Dale had the school teacher's arm, and the soft glances which he was giving his companion were unmistakable!

Peggy drew herself up fiercely. Her lips compressed, and her nose tilted haughtily.

And Dale, looking up to tip his Stetson, thought to himself, "Gosh, she must hate me." Funny—in spite of his exalted feeling of a moment ago, this new knowledge gave him a sudden stab. Not that he loved Peggy, of course, having decided upon Beth with her ideals. But he couldn't forget in a second, somehow, that he and Peg had had a lot of roistering good times together.

DALE took up his duties almost at once in the Hassayampa First National, and if stalking about a drab banking room was at first heart-breakingly dull for a man whose bread and butter had always been thrills, still, he soon discovered that the job did have its compensations.

To be more explicit, Dale discovered that Beth found it necessary to wander in nearly every day to watch her protégé achieving grace. He looked forward to these impromptu chats, and commenced to worry that the time was drawing near when Beth would finish her duties for the term.

"Have—have you made any summer plans?" he asked her on one such occasion.

"Why—" faltered Beth.

It was then that, abruptly, a jaunty, sleek-haired individual interrupted them.

"Hey, bud," he turned to Dale, "where's de pens an' ink?"

"Why," grinned Dale, "right there beside you, hombre." And he half turned to indicate the desk to the man.

Then there was a scream from Beth. "Dale, turn around quick! They're—"

The ex-cowpuncher whirled, his hand darting to his hip holster. At once, everything seemed to happen simultaneously. Four other youths with sawed-off shotguns had jammed into the front door, while the man who had asked Dale to locate pen and ink made a dive for Dale's wrist at the very moment Dale drew. Beth fainted. The cowpuncher and the bandit crashed to the floor in a furious battle for Dale's gun.

Two of the men with shotguns came dashing up to aid their companion, but Dale was equal to the occasion. After two weeks of idleness he was literally spoiling for such a scrap, so that the man who had stood off a half-dozen Diamond waddies just for the fun of the thing was a weakling beside this puncher who was struggling in earnest.

Dale swung a mighty fist to the point of his antagonist's jaw, and as the man crumpled and relaxed his hold on the gun, Dale seized it.

He had it up and flaming. One of the shotgun duo staggered in his tracks and fell. The other turned to flee. Dale drew a bead and fired again. He clipped the man on the shoulder. But the two others who had remained near the door gathered up the man as he tottered. Their shotguns blazed a warning volley, and under cover of that confusion, all three rushed back to the sidewalk.

A piece of the shotgun charge had slashed across Dale's cheek. But the puncher only laughed. This was the life! This was what he had been waiting for. He leaped after the men.

Then he halted abruptly and all thought of pursuit went out of him. Beth lay beside him where she had fallen in her faint, and now—now there was a trickle of blood from a wound in her side.

Dale heard the roar of a powerful motor car making its getaway, outside.

He heard the futile hoofs of Mike Cummings' posse loping in pursuit. But only through a daze. He had swept the girl's body into his arms, and he stood there for a long second looking down into the pale, drawn face. Beth was hurt! She might be dying!

BETH didn't die, of course. Because her wound proved upon examination to be no more serious than Dale's. But the fact that she could accompany him to the Rendezvous Dance Hall that night detracted nothing from the romantic aspects of the situation.

Up until now, Dale hadn't kissed Beth. Now he did. And as they sat out in the cottonwood grove between dances, under a soft, Southwestern moon, Dale's voice grew a little husky.

"The State Bankers' Association paid me its reward," he explained. "Ten thousand dollars for them bandits, and—"

"Those," said Beth.

"What?"

"Those bandits. Not them. And, Dale, don't say 'what,' either."

The puncher flushed. He didn't mind such corrections. He rejoiced in them, envisaging the rest of his life as a steady march toward perfection in all things, with Beth his mentor and his sympathetic guide.

"Um, er—yeh," he went on. "Ten thousand bucks for those bandits, and with what money I've already got—"

"Have," supplied his mentor.

Dale winced, irritated for one tiny second. But his enthusiasm for the rest of his story carried him on at once.

"All right, and with the money I *have got*—"

"Have—alone."

"With the money I have alone, I'll be able to buy a ranch. I was talkin' to Wells this afternoon, an' it seems the bank's got one lolapalusa of a property it took over on a mortgage some two-three years back. The Lazy Y, and—"

"But Dale," cried Beth. "You're not going to be a—a—just a rancher. Where's your ambition? We'll take that money, and—and—"

"And what?"

As a matter of fact, they really didn't decide. But they did get this much planned. Beth's teaching was over, now. She was ready, indeed, after Dale's heroism, to plan for the summer. To-morrow morning, they would rent a car and drive over to Montezuma, the county seat, where Dale would spend two dollars of his fortune for a marriage license. Then they'd drop around to some minister's, get married, and leave for the coast on a honeymoon.

Dale's future could be considered at their subsequent leisure, when Beth, as Dale's bride, could argue more commandingly than Beth as his sweetheart, no doubt.

But Dale in his bliss missed this bit of Beth's strategy. He had no misgivings. No real ones, that is, although once he woke up, that night, in the midst of a nightmare.

He had been dreaming that he was repeating his plea to Beth. "I'll buy the Lazy Y, and—"

"And that'll be fine," the girl in the dream had answered. Only—this dream girl wasn't Beth. She was Peg.

The puncher frowned as he sat bolt upright in bed. Dang it all, that's just the way Peg would have answered, too! He strove to banish a picture that was a little too alluring. Peg? Why, Peg didn't have any ambitions. Peg wasn't blessed with altruistic notions about human uplift. Peg was—Peg was mighty like himself.

NINE o'clock the following night found Peggy McDonnell sitting out a dance at the Rendezvous with her father. A rather listless Peggy, somehow, compared to the usual, effervescent little minx. Her father took her hand and patted it.

"Maybe it ain't true," he suggested hopefully.

Peg shook her head. "It is, though, because Edna told me, and Beth had just been talking to her. They were

going over to Montezuma, this morning. By now—" The girl looked at her wrist watch. "By now they're not only married, but they're halfway over to the coast on their honeymoon."

She roused herself quickly, gave her brown bobbed hair a toss, and seized her father's hand.

"But I don't care, Dad. Come on—let's dance."

She took a couple of steps out toward the floor, before she suddenly stopped stock-still in utter breathlessness!

The door that they were passing had burst open, and now, silhouetted there in the portal stood Dale Treynor. Dale in his best black suit—in shoes, not boots, and with a wilted white carnation sticking out of his lapel.

The puncher's face lit up as he saw her. He hurried up.

"Dance, Peggy?" he asked eagerly.

"But—but Dale," she gasped. "I thought—"

"Oh, that," he grinned sheepishly. "That's all off." He took her arm and tried to urge her out onto the floor.

But Peggy wasn't to be placated so easily. According to gossip, Beth had set out most enthusiastically, this morning.

Peggy's brown eyes flashed, and she stamped her foot.

"Dale Treynor," she flamed. "I don't feel like dancing with a man that'll jilt a girl at the very altar. Even if he jilts her to—to come back to me!"

Dale chuckled at the outburst.

"But I didn't," he protested. "It was the other way round. Shall—shall I tell you about it?"

Peggy's brown eyes opened wide. In a flash all her indignation was transferred to Beth. Dale was the injured one, and she was sorry for him.

"But—but Beth was telling everybody this morning how happy she was going to be."

"It's incredible," grinned Dale, "but true." And he heaved a sigh—of relief. Now that it was all over, he felt giddily light-hearted.

He looked into Peg's eyes and implored her. And Peg? Peg looked into the puncher's eyes, and decided to dance with him and hear the utterly amazing story. How Dale and Beth had driven to Montezuma in a rented car. How Dale had left the girl sitting in the front seat and had gone into the courthouse to get a marriage license. And how he had come out to find both the car and the girl gone.

"I figgered at first," he explained, "that she'd gone off on some errand, but when the whole day passed an' she didn't come back, why, then I came back here and found she hadn't showed up at her boardin' house either. No sir, she jest took that there car, an' drifted!"

"And now you'll have to pay for the car!" Peg was furious.

"Reckon as how," grinned Dale merrily. "But it was only a flivver. And it'd of been cheap if it was a Rolls Royce."

Peggy's brow suddenly puckered.

"It seems kind of fishy, though," she announced on more sober reflection. "I mean it isn't like Beth."

"Would I lie to you, Peggy?"

"No, but—"

Dale lulled Peg's doubts to rest, though. "I reckon you can never figger a woman," he told her, and with that the two of them inquired no more into Beth's amazing disappearance. Both of them wanted to believe that she'd drifted, and so both of them did believe it.

When the music stopped, Dale led Peggy outside into the cottonwood grove. It was the same romantic spot where, the night before, he had proposed to Beth. But the moon was warmer, to-night. A warm June breeze drifted about them. In the far distance the Hassayampa Hills shimmered in the pale, ghostly light.

"Peggy," Dale commenced with difficulty, "I've been such a danged idiot for so long. I've been blind. And it wasn't even my own common sense that opened my eyes. It was jest accident.

I don't know what to say to you or—"

But the girl who loved him wasn't going to make things hard. "We all of us make mistakes, I reckon," she told him. "I made a big one, Dale, when I let you stay in jail like that. I guess all this jest served me right—"

The moon dipped a little lower, and suddenly the puncher had her in his arms. No more explanations or apologies were in order. They simply sat there, staring dreamily into the moonlight, everything forgiven and forgotten.

Somehow Dale's question seemed superfluous now, since he knew what the answer would be. But he asked it, just the same. "Peg, you'll marry me?"

And he thrilled to the finger tips when she said, "Why of course, Dale, if you love me."

Love her! Dale realized at last what it really was to love. They sat there awhile longer, then wandered back to the dance.

And then, just as they entered the dance hall, a Mexican youth of about twelve sidled up to the puncher. "Your name Treynor?" he asked.

When Dale nodded, the boy produced a note. "Guy give me a dollar to hand you this," he said.

Dale took the note, and turned to Peg. "If you'll excuse me a second," he apologized, "why—"

"Go right ahead," Peg invited.

So Dale read, and an earthquake seemed to open the ground at his feet.

The missive commenced in handwriting all too familiar. He read:

> Dearest Dale:
>
> This is to say that the same gang that held up the bank kidnaped me from in front of the courthouse, this morning. They're holding me for ten thousand dollars ransom, and I'm told to tell you to put the money beside the big cedar in Sabina Canyon. Also, for your sake and mine, darling, you mustn't warn anyone else.
>
> Love from your own,
>
> Beth.

Beth hadn't jilted him, then! Beth was still in love with him! And he was engaged to both the girls!

Peggy must have seen his face go white, for she touched his arm. "Is—is it anything serious, Dale?"

The puncher looked into her worried little face, and for a moment his agony seemed more than he could bear.

"Serious," he groaned, "it's—oh, heaven—"

There was only one thing to do of course, and the puncher somehow pulled himself together. However little he might want to marry Beth, he had no right to abandon her with that bandit crew. He did not dare to delegate someone else to the rescue, for the note had forbidden communication with the authorities, and someone might be watching him, this very moment. It was his job, and his alone.

He came close to Peggy for a second, and gathered her once more into his arms. Then he said, in a voice grown weak, "One thing, Peg, I love you—"

Before Peg could ask what he meant, he was off. He borrowed a pony, flung himself into the saddle, and set out at a lope. As mile after mile of desert slipped away, he took his mount into his confidence.

"Pony," he lamented, "the worst of it is, if I do rescue her, she'll love me ten times as much. And yet I've got to rescue her!"

The first wisps of pink dawn found him deep in the Hassayampa Hills, in the midst of the rugged badlands.

"And what's more, pony," he went on, "supposin' I tell her I can't go through with the marriage? Then Peg won't have me, either. After tellin' me how she'd hate a man who'd jilt a girl at the altar." He wiped the cold sweat from his forehead and spurred the faster. "Nag, tell me, now—was they ever, anywhere, a cowpoke more miserable?"

He had brought the ten thousand dollars, since he had it on his person, anyway, having drawn it out that morning to take to the coast with him. He hadn't decided, however, up until the time he reached the mouth of the Sa-

bina, whether he'd leave it as commanded, or not.

One little voice suggested, "Why not leave it, Dale? Maybe she wouldn't want you, after you were broke."

Now, though, as he reached the Sabina, he pulled up suddenly, to study the ground. And in the pale morning light he beheld tire tracks—tire tracks leading beyond the canyon, not into it. Footprints announced, furthermore, that one man had got out of the car here to go up the Sabina and wait for the money.

Dale's face suddenly lit up. He knew that another man had gone in town with the note. This meant, consequently, that only one bandit was guarding Beth, and that Beth and bandit would be wherever those tire tracks lead to. He made his decision about the money in a flash. Fighter that he was, he chose the fighting way.

"Because," he explained to the pony, "it's the only way to make sure that she's rescued proper."

He urged his pony on more cautiously, now.

"And yet," he told himself, "if I win, I lose—"

The old wagon trail wound in and out of scarred arroyos and jagged hills. Its turns were tortuous and the puncher took them carefully.

"If I win, I—"

He pulled up, suddenly, his nostrils quivering at the scent of a wood fire. Dismounting, he let the pony's reins fall to the ground.

He drew his six-gun, and crept round the next steep twist on foot.

He had made one miscalculation, it seemed. The man who had brought the note into town had already returned. Dale had two bandits on his hands, not one. But what was the difference, to Dale?

The puncher gave the men fair warning. "Reach, gents," he commanded. And when one bandit elected not to reach, skyward at any rate, Dale let him have it. The man made a lunge for his holster, staggered and dropped. His companion exhibited better judgment.

Dale rushed forward. "Where's Beth?" he demanded. The bandit indicated the car, parked a little way off in a mesquite clump.

She wasn't hurt, Beth—though her wrists and ankles were a little raw from the ropes which had bound her. The girl fairly melted into the puncher's arms as he unloosed her.

"Dale," she faltered, "I—I knew you'd come." And throwing her arms about the puncher, she kissed him.

Dale submitted, of course. He could hardly do otherwise, but the touch of her lips was pain. He'd won, as honor and bravery had commanded that he had to win. But he'd lost. Lost everything precious except that honor.

"Well," suggested the puncher huskily, "should we be driftin' back?" He said very little on the long trek home, and he was thankful that Beth, after her experience, didn't feel very conversational, either. He left the girl at her boarding house with a "see you later," and then retired to his own room in the Palace House to be alone with his thoughts.

A LONG hour passed, and Dale surveyed the half-smoked butts of a half-dozen cigarettes. He rose, took his Stetson off the peg, and set out to return to Beth's. She loved him a lot, of course, especially after this. So it wouldn't be right to break her heart. Also it occurred to the puncher that possibly he could get her to postpone the marriage for a while, on the pretext of his having to be around for the one bandit's trial. And that possibly, if it were postponed long enough—

He rapped on the door. "Beth in?" he asked her landlady.

The woman smiled. "Why, bless my soul, Dale, you're jest about a minute too late. She went a-tootin' off to the jail not five minutes ago."

Dale nodded, and returned to the sidewalk. Then he too turned his footsteps toward the lockup.

He heard Beth's voice as he came into the main room—carrying from the antechamber where he had had that "long serious talk" with her not so long ago.

Beth was saying, "You're not really bad, Slim—"

Dale stopped in his tracks, and his mouth fell inanely open. Beth's conversation had, somehow, a most familiar ring to it!

"Nobody's really bad, Slim," she went on. "People just do wrong because—" She was telling Slim all her theories of sociology, now, and Slim was telling her that he at least wasn't as bad as his companions had been. "I'm sure you weren't," Beth agreed, "and, what's more, I want very much to help you, Slim."

Dale eavesdropped no longer. He pushed the little communicating door open and strolled in on the conference. It was a signal for the pretty missionary of uplift to start and flush guiltily.

"Dale," she asked, "can—can I talk to you a minute?"

"AND so," Dale explained it all to Peggy that evening, "danged if it don't turn out that she jilts me, after all. It seems I was jest a interestin' specimen that had oughta be reformed, an' that for a while she thought she'd fell in love with me. But when this here bandit comes a-traipsin' along, so much more wicked than I ever thoughta bein', he turns out to be much more interestin' than me. From then on, I don't stand a chance."

Dale gave way before the emotional strain of the past two days and burst into hearty laughter.

"Now whada you think o' that?"

Peg shot him a grin.

"Let's hope," she said, "that when her bandit gets jilted for a murderer, he'll be as joyous about it as you were." And then she nestled her head back against his breast again, and Dale kissed her.

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The Wolf Howls

By Tracy Spitler

Van wasn't going to let any girl cut him out of the bunch and mark him for slaughter—not he. Howcome was it, then, that he was found begging to be corralled one fine day? Well, Van probably never knew howcome, but the inside story is plumb good.

THE strange waddy was singing softly as his saddle horse and pack animal jogged down the winding trail. Riding alongside a huge branding corral, sprawled out where rolling hills slope to a level, he continued to croon:

I'm a pilgrim, la de da da—

He pulled up his horse and sat waiting for someone to notice him. Dust and smoke and bawling cattle were thick inside of the seven-rail-high enclosure. Those toilin' hombres in there, the waddy thought, were plenty busy. No use hornin' in at the wrong time and askin' for a job. So he waited and warbled, absent-mindedly and far more loudly than he realized:

I'm a pilgrim, I'm a stranger—

"Yeah, hombre, you sure must be!" An ancient rider, making clanking noises with branding irons in a log fire, turned a weary head and exposed a pair of bitter eyes. He left the fire, and,

approaching the pole fence, he spoke guardedly. "You sure must be both pilgrim and stranger if you're cravin' work on *this* here spread, but you sure don't look like no Saturday afternoon cowboy."

There was certainly nothing of the dude about the young rider, though from the peak of his gray Stetson to his concha-studded, batwing chaps there was a cleanliness and a nicety of taste which bespoke the care he gave his appearance. Somewhat leathery of face, intensely blue of eye, his lean torso as straight as a running iron, he was as surely a product of the range as were the bawling Herefords in the corral.

His horse bore a Slash B on the left shoulder, which was not one of the Bad Water country's registered brands. His saddle was a center fire rig; the coiled rope fastened to it was the leather riata of the Southwest. A stranger, admittedly, but no "pilgrim," as the old-timers called tenderfeet.

The old man sighed. He shot a swift glance to where two dust and sweat-stained waddies were holding down both ends of a thrown calf while a third worker slapped a red-hot branding iron against its side.

"Drift, hombre," muttered the old man; "drift before she comes for another iron. You'd better, I'm tellin' you! That girl has learned to pitch a wicked loop and—"

"Girl? I don't see any *girl*. From where I'm sittin' it sure looks like the only humans visible are escaped inmates from the old soldiers' home. No offense, amigo, but I'm damned if I ever did see such a collection of granddads in a brandin' corral, and I've seen plenty of brandin' corrals. Why the absence of the flower of manhood? Is there a war or somethin'?"

"War? Stranger, there's hell a-poppin', high, wide and handsome. And here comes one of the reasons for same. Her ma's another. I've warned you. Be firm. No matter what she offers you, say no and stick to it. Us men've got to stand together or there won't be no place left for us on earth."

She came swiftly toward the fire and thrust the iron she had been using into the glowing embers. Her face was flushed with heat and exertion. Across one cheek was a sooty smudge streaked with sweat which ran from beneath the shabby range hat shading her dark eyes. Her mouth was sweet. Her throat, where it showed above her neckerchief, was lovely.

And the sweat-stained shirt and shapeless blue denim overalls, tucked into the tops of fancily stitched riding boots, hinted at lovely slenderness. She squinted at the sun and said to the old man, "You know we have to clean up this stuff before the second circle riders come in. Do be a darling, Tex, and hustle—" Her coaxing voice was a honeyed drawl.

"You know damn well, Sally Lou Wingo, I'm too old to be a darlin' or to hustle either. And when a gent's as stove up as I am—"

"He should use horse liniment and keep his sorrows to himself. I'm ashamed of you, Tex! Such talk!"

She moved toward the fence. "Howdy, hombre! Plenty hot for June, isn't it?" Swiftly as a trick rider vaults to the saddle, she was seated on the top rail. She took off her hat and gloves and ran long, tanned fingers through the damp mass of her short, brown hair. She made a fan of her hat and her look was level as she smiled coolly at the waddy.

"I heard your burst of song," she said. "Have you any other accomplishments?"

"Well, ma'am, that depends." What'n time had the Tex gent meant by hell a-poppin' and this girl bein' one of the reasons for same? Pitched a wicked loop, did she? Huh! And what had she to offer him that he'd best say no to? "Leastways," he submitted cautiously, "I've got another song."

She widened her eyes at him and caught her lower lip in her teeth. "Don't tell me!"

"Don't aim to, ma'am. A song should be sung, not told. It goes like this:

"Lions on the mountains,
I've drove them to their lairs.
Wildcats are my playmates and I've—"

"I know that one," Sally Lou interrupted hastily. "It has grizzly bears and rattlesnakes in it too, but really, seeing that I'm in the cow business and way behind on the calf work—"

"You have no ear for music," chided the waddy. "Listen!

"I'm as wild as the horse that roams the plains—"

Sally Lou cut it short again. "That's interesting, if true. In fact, that's fine, hombre!" A light of keener interest danced in her eyes, her lips parted with eagerness. "If you're half as wild as you claim you are—"

"Lady, I'm wilder'n that, no foolin'!" He grinned as he added the song's last line.

I'm a wild wolf and this is my night to howl.

True, he had never felt the craving to be wild down Dos Rios way, but what of it? He could be. The altitude or something in this high northern country was suddenly making his blood tingle. Whatever this girl's game was, he'd play it with her—for a while, anyway.

Kinda sweet-lookin' kid, hunched up like that with her knees crossed and one boot heel hooked over the second rail. Cute, the way she'd put on her hat just now, slanted over one eye like a young feller which thinks he's growed up and devilish all of a sudden. And the Tex gent was sure locoed. Why, anyone could see there was no more harm in this here girl than there was in a new-born calf.

The waddy was warmed with sudden good will toward Sally Lou. Before he quite realized what was happening he found himself telling her that his name was Van Brent, that he'd sold a little ranch down in Arizona because he was weary of the desert, that he had liked the Bad Water country at sight and he was liking it better every minute.

The second circle men were bringing in their drives before Van had finished talking and Sally Lou gasped guiltily.

"My stars!" she exclaimed, "I bet there hasn't been a lick of work done while we've been powwowing. Another day lost! Want a job which requires a wild man to hold it, Mr. Brent? Want to be"—she repeated her trick of widening her eyes and biting her lip; Van found himself watching for it—"foreman of the Wingo spread? Don't say no, please! We pay awfully good wages. We have to. I—I'm sure I'm safe in offering you two hundred dollars a month and keep. And your pick of the remuda. Please say yes, Mr. Brent!"

In her eagerness she leaned perilously toward him on her lofty perch. Van edged his horse closer to the fence and put a hand on her shoulder to steady her. There was a great rattling of irons at the fire and he glanced toward it. The Tex gent shook his head and frowned warningly.

What ailed the old galoot, anyway? For that matter, what ailed all the old galoots in the corral and the four riders, also old, who had just shoved in their drives? Lookin' at him like he was the leadin' attraction at a necktie sociable. Lookin' like they felt plumb sorry for him but daren't do a thing about it.

Somehow it was funny. Van threw back his head and laughed recklessly. "You've hired a foreman, Miss Sally Lou Wingo!"

She threw a triumphant look over her shoulder at the idle cowhands. "Listen, hombres! From now on you're taking orders from Van Brent, savvy? All right, let's get to work!"

Only once during the hectic hours which followed did Tex venture another word with Van. "Don't say I

didn't warn you. Don't never say I didn't tell you she's just like her ma. You're plumb done for by now, hombre; you're all tangled up in this girl's rope."

"You're locoed, amigo! No loop can touch me!" Van was beginning to believe it, and he proceeded to display a lot of speed. With strength and skill heightened by contrast to the slower movements of the men with whom he worked, he flanked down calf after calf. Sally Lou worked with him, silently and efficiently.

At the back of Van's mind was a wonder that such a girl, dainty beneath the corral-bred grime, should be toiling at a man's job; but a queer and reckless zest had taken hold of him. Questions could wait. He was getting a kick out of setting a pace for the others to keep —if they could!

He'd show her and them! If this job called for a hard hombre, he'd be that. He was! He caroled:

Rattlesnakes have bitten me,
And crawled right off to die.
I'm a wild wolf and this is my night to howl.

He sang it so often that the outfit was calling him The Wolf before that day's work was over. He liked the name and secretly determined to live up to it. But by the time he spread his blankets under the star-filled sky that night, he knew the name was intended for a joke.

He was still in blissful ignorance, however, when fading light put an end to the day's branding and Sally Lou asked him to ride into headquarters ranch with her and have supper there rather than at the chuck wagon up the draw. Somehow she had seen to it that the rest of the outfit had had no chance to speak privately with the new foreman.

The long ride to the home ranch was a silent one. The girl was plainly tired and disinclined to talk. Van contented himself with a view of the country. He hadn't seen this part of it. He had crossed the divide by way of Squaw Pass that morning, south of here, through a region where ranch houses are scarce and towns non-existent. This was good cow country, his knowing eyes told him, but maybe he should have circulated round a bit before lighting so sudden-like on the Wingo spread. Might've gathered some information. Not that it would have made much difference, but—

The cook at the home ranch was a strapping big Irish woman who said, as Sally Lou and Van dismounted in the dooryard, "Glory be to God! And where did ye find himsilf, mavourneen?"

"This is Mr. Brent, Annie." Sally Lou was very dignified. "Our new foreman."

"Indade and indade, ye needn't be tellin' me that he's new. I can see that for mysilf. And he's green and tinder too, poor lamb."

Van didn't like it. Out of the corner of his eye he had glimpsed two husky girls doing the chores. Something queer about that, too. On a big place like the Wingo spread men ranch hands —men cooks, likewise—are the usual thing. He was beginning to think some weird fate had hazed him into an Adamless Eden.

Sally Lou pointed out the washroom and told him to make himself at home. Annie clattered pots and pans on the stove and muttered that supper would be ruined entirely unless it was served at once.

"Just give me ten minutes to change," the girl coaxed. "At that I bet I'll be dressed before Mother gets home."

"The sheriff will not be here at all, at all. 'Tis hersilf that's gone to Chimney Gulch to bring back two prisoners."

Which bit of information failed to register with Van, sloshing soapsuds in the washroom.

He whistled softly through his teeth as he and Sally Lou sat down to their meal. While he had thought her kinda sweet and cute in her shabby working clothes, he was totally unprepared for

the effect she now produced. Her dress was something pink and perky. Her face glowed with health and a vigorous scrubbing, and the sparkling lights in her dark eyes were repeated in the gloss of her tidy hair.

The ranch house interior was a little breath-taking, too. It was a cut above anything Van had ever seen. On all sides were signs of superlative comfort and good taste. It made him feel awkward and diffident.

He devoted more than ordinary attention to his food and let Sally Lou do the talking, and while he learned that she knew a great deal about the cattle business, he felt that she was making a brilliant effort to keep him from learning anything about the queer business which was so evidently going on at the Wingo spread.

She was making another effort also; it was what the Tex hombre doubtless meant when he said she pitched a wicked loop. With her honeyed drawl, her quick smile and the frank approval in her eyes, she was being fascinating. Yes, thought Van, if ever a girl tried to make a good impression on a man—in a perfectly ladylike way—Sally Lou Wingo was doing it now.

Van grew wary. He thought, "Some hombres might fall for this here, thinkin' themselves plumb irresistible, but I've got another idea. She don't think no more of me than she does of a steer which she'd pluck off'n the range and haze into a feed lot to get him ready for the slaughter. But why slaughter in this case? And why'd she cut me out to be the victim?"

Annie made a score of trips from the kitchen to the dining room during the meal, and she took an unnecessarily long time to clear the table after the girl and man had gone into the living room. "Close herdin' us, huh?" Van made silent comment; "just like a señorita's duenna down across the Border. Now whose idea is that, the girl's or the cook's?"

Piñon wood was burning in the fireplace—summer evenings are often chilly in the Bad Water—and Sally Lou indicated a big chair close to it. "That's comfortable. Do you care to smoke? There are cigarettes in that box on the table. Or would you rather roll your own?"

Van disdained "tailor-mades" and built a smoke to his liking. Then he paced, with a rider's stiff-legged gait, up and down before the fire.

"Don't think I'm not appreciatin' the elegant treatment you're givin' me, ma'am," he said. "I am, all right, but it spooks me, kinda. Like range critters'd be spooked—if they could think—when their food changes from grass and water to beet pulp, seed cake and hay.

"That means their end's in sight, like you know. Well, bein' a range critter myself, in a manner of speakin', I'm wonderin' if all this"—his glance swept the luxurious room—"and you, don't mean my finish."

Annie rattled dishes loudly. Sally Lou flushed. She cast a hasty look about the room and it came to rest on a guitar lying on a window seat. She picked up the instrument and strummed the strings. Then, gaining courage, she smiled up at Van. "The wild wolf prowls and feels like howling, huh? All right, let's make it a duet, amigo. Come on!

"Lions on the mountains,
I've drove them to their lairs.
Wildcats are my playmates
And I've wrastled grizzly bears.
Centipedes can't mar my tough old hide—"

Van's hand shot out and took the guitar. "Like I told you," he said, "I know that one. Now, what's the meanin' of all this? Why'd you hire me so sudden-like this mornin'? And why should a girl like you be doin' her damnedest to vamp a driftin' waddy?"

Sally Lou's cheeks flamed. "I'm *not!* And if you haven't sense enough to appreciate a—a little extra effort as a—a sort of welcome, why, drift on, waddy, drift on!" She flung out her hands and indicated wide, open spaces.

"Maybeso I'll do that, but not until you've answered my questions. Now then, how come nothin' but old men for cowhands? Nothin' but husky females for ranch hands? It looks damn funny."

"Yes? Well, it's anything but funny, stranger, and the bitter truth is that the Wingo spread is boycotted. We're lucky to have husky females and old men to work for us, and I guess we wouldn't have had even old men if I hadn't—" She paused and bit her lip.

"Well?" prompted Van.

Sally Lou met his eyes defiantly. "If I hadn't worked on the sympathies of those old codgers you saw. They were glad enough to work for my dad years ago, and most of them were under obligation to him, one way or another, and I'm paying them twice as much as they could make elsewhere. In fact, no one else would hire them as riders.

"But are they grateful? They are not! They're doing us a favor, if you please, and giving us a black eye to every man under forty who shows up in the country. But I don't care!"

The girl's chin shot out and she made fists of her hands. "I'm going to get our stuff gathered, branded and shoved up on summer range if I have to call out the militia or the Boy Scouts to do it!"

"But why has runnin' a cow ranch come to that? Why're you boycotted, like you say?"

"Because my mother got herself elected sheriff last fall. No one believed she could. The men took her campaign as a joke and most of them didn't bother to vote. But the women were strong for Mother and put her in office.

"You see, things have been pretty rotten in the Bad Water the past few years. I'm naming no names, but there are certain men who make a bluff at stock raising but hell raising's more their line. They'd corrupted public officials and what else they did was nobody's business.

"Well, as it happened, my dad and my brother," Sally Lou's lips twisted painfully, "were shot to death in the Red Elephant gambling house about a year and a half ago and it nearly killed Mother. The Red Elephant," she added, "is the big building next to the Wolf Trail town hall and jail, if you happened to notice when you were in town."

"Wolf Trail's still somethin' I've got to look forward to," Van informed her. "I failed to hit same when I drifted into these parts."

"Which probably accounts for the fact that I now have the pleasure of your company, huh?" She smiled whimsically. "I do hope it means a lucky break for me. I just can't get work out of our riders. They need a man to boss 'em.

"But I was going to tell you about that shooting scrap. From all we can gather, it was just one of those free-for-all things that start over nothing. You know? The lights go out, bullets fly and men are downed and it's just too bad. No one intended murder, nothing can be proved and what are you going to do about it?

"Nothing, you think, like everybody else, in a tough cow town? Maybeso, stranger, but Mother thinks differently. It was too late to do anything about our own folks, of course, and maybe she's going at it in the wrong way. She's pretty bitter and her experience has simply made her hate all men, which makes plenty of enemies—but she's enforcing the law.

"She's cleaning up Bad Water county in spite of the fact that she has practically no cooperation. It's hard to get deputies to work with her because they resent having a woman over them. What makes it worse, as they see things," Sally Lou chuckled, "is the fact that the jailer at Wolf Trail is a woman, too!

"Since she's been in office, Mother's shown them a trick or two, and certain parties are realizing that she means business. Short of violence there's no way to get her out of office

before her term expires, so they're trying to force her to resign by making her ridiculous, and incidentally ruining her in the cattle business.

"I'm sure *all* the men don't quite realize what's up. There's been some clever propaganda and to most of them the whole thing's a joke. They're getting a kick out of saying they're banding together to protect the rights of men because women are trying to run 'em off the face of the earth.

"Mother's going to fight it out, no matter what, and I'm telling you, Mr. Brent, I'm siding with her! As long as we have a dollar to our names, as long as I can pitch a loop and top a horse and get a rider to work for me—"

"Even," Van cut in, "if you have to vamp him to do it?" He regretted that as soon as he said it, but he was sore. It was all right for her to charm him. He liked it. But *any* stray rider! A breed vaquero, for instance. Van sneered.

Sally Lou gave him a haughty look, but her lips were unsteady. "Call it that if you want to. All's fair in war, isn't it?"

"Yes'm. In love and war, so I've heard tell."

Her haughtiness increased. "What's love got to do with this? It's war and nothing else, but in spite of all the two-bit badmen on this range, Mr. Brent, Wingo cattle will be worked out, grazed and shipped as long as there's a Wingo left to do it. So there's the lay, hombre. What are you going to do about it?"

Well, Van was on the sunny side of thirty, heart-whole and fancy-free, with a taste for adventure that was supported by real courage. Sally Lou was young and pretty and rather frightened looking, in spite of her brave talk, so who is there to blame Van for saying, "Well, ma'am, I guess I'll play it as it lays. Shake!"

When he rode back to where the outfit was camped that night, he was adding, through song, the wild wolf's howl to the clamor made by coyote yelpings. He was still humming the tune softly when he spread out his bedroll.

A blanketed form to the left of him reared up and said sarcastically, "Well, well, if it ain't The Wolf returned to the fold!" From the other side a voice replied, "Wolf, hell! It's nothin' but a lamb."

Van thought seriously of going for his gun, but second thought showed him the folly of shooting up the first outfit he'd ever had to boss. So the night passed without murder, which was a source of regret to him as time and the calf work went on.

Short of actual insubordination, the old riders treated the new foreman with a contempt that was insulting. His youth and ability to get a fine job elsewhere made them regard him as a traitor to his sex, a weakling twisted round a girl's finger. Their sly taunts, their sardonic references to him as The Wolf got under his hide and made his blood boil. Meeting the lady sheriff didn't help things any, either.

She drove out in a speedy roadster to the branding corral the second day after Van's arrival. Sally Lou saw her and called to Van, "Come and let me introduce you to Mother."

Sheriff Wingo was a buxom woman in her forties, with an outdoor complexion, piercing eyes and a grip like a man's. She ran an appraising look over Van, much as a cattle buyer would size up a steer, shot a few searching, personal questions at him and then said:

"You understand, of course, that under ordinary circumstances, I should not consider you sufficiently qualified for the position of foreman. As it is, the best I can hope for is that you're honest, that you'll make some attempt to earn the high wages my daughter so impetuously offered you, and that you'll not" —she frowned as she glanced from the young man to the young girl— "presume on the advantage extraordinary circumstances have given you."

"Wow!" thought Van. "That's one on the button, all right. Well, if this old sister thinks I'm standin' for such talk, she's got another think comin'." His jaws tightened and his eyes grew steely, but as the only reply he could think of was, "To hell with you and you're job, ma'am," and as that fell short of what he wanted to convey, he remained silent while the sheriff started her car and went away.

Sally Lou leaned from her saddle and put a placating hand on Van's arm. "Don't mind Mother, please, Mr. Brent. She's really a darling. The best mother in the world."

Van laughed shortly and eased his arm out from under her hand. "She may be all right as a mother," he said, "but as a boss she's a pain in the neck, beggin' your pardon."

"You'd better!" the girl flared. "And I bet you'd be as ornery as a fighting stallion if you had things to contend with like Mother has." She threw a cautious look over her shoulder to see that none of the outfit was within earshot. "There's something in the wind, that's why Mother's especially difficult this morning.

"You see, the day you came, she went over to Chimney Gulch and brought back two prisoners from the jail there to Wolf Trail. I needn't bother to tell you why those men were arrested in the first place, but Mother's sure that, if they're brought to trial, facts will come out that will incriminate some men who are behind the lawlessness in the Bad Water.

"Well, Mother received an unsigned letter warning her that those prisoners were going to be spirited out of the Chimney Gulch jail and the country, so she's put them in the Wolf Trail calaboose under the eye of the jailer she can trust. Mother's not sure that her latest move's going to mean trouble, but just between you and me, she's plenty spooked, though she won't admit it even to herself, I guess. Now, you can't blame her for being waspy, can you?"

Van rolled a cigarette. "She can be any way she wants to be so far as I'm concerned. I'm plumb regretful, Miss Sally Lou, but I guess I'll be driftin'. I was sure enough locoed when I took this job, but I'm recoverin' rapid."

"You mean—you're quitting?"

"Yes'm. The dodderin' gents you have for an outfit and the hostile lady you have for a mother have sort of got under my skin, if you know what I mean."

Sally Lou's lips were disdainful. "'Centipedes can't mar my tough old hide,'" she sang mockingly. "Oh, what a swell wild wolf you turned out to be!"

"Insinuatin' that I'm yellow?"

"No, I can't honestly say that. I guess I wouldn't stay either, if I were in your place. But look! Can't you consider this a sporting proposition? Heavy odds against you, but why not take a chance on beating them? Frankly, I don't see how I'll get through the season without you."

Looking into her honest, pleading eyes, watching her effort to fight back tears, Van knew that he was roped, all right. If such a girl could play against heavy odds, he would too.

The weeks that followed were filled with work and strife, but little by little the cattle were moving up to summer range. The days didn't trouble Van much; it was the evenings spent at the home ranch that bothered him, when Sally Lou, sure that the sheriff would remain in town, invited him to have supper with her.

She explained her reason for asking him only when her mother was absent. That lady was so worn out with public affairs that she did not care to have strangers around at home. Van had reached the stage where he didn't care *who* was around so long as he could see Sally Lou.

Her presence made him blind and deaf to the taunts of the outfit, it made him indifferent to the presence of Annie, the cook, riding herd on him and the girl while they talked and

laughed across the supper table. After the meal was over, Sally Lou would get her guitar and lead the way to the hammock on the big house veranda. Van could hear Annie breathing hard just inside the screen door, but he didn't mind, though she did sound like a wind-broken horse—poor, anxious thing.

Sally Lou strummed her guitar and her voice was rich and throaty. She sang *La Paloma; Roll On, Little Dogies;* and *The Cowboy's Lament.* Sometimes they'd make a duet of the "wild and woolly" song. It had come to be a joke with them by now.

Van wanted to believe the girl was sincere in her obvious liking for him. She treated him as she would a valued friend. But even on the range there are social distinctions; there's a wide gulf between big house and bunkhouse. It takes love and courage to bridge it. "I'll just pretend she's *not* pretendin'," Van told himself, "and enjoy the rosy dream whilst it lasts. But I'm fearin' I'm goin' to come to with a jolt one of these days."

That day dawned without a hint of disaster, however. The calendar said it was the Fourth of July, but to the outfit it was just another working day. The last of the cattle were ready to be pushed up-country and Sally Lou was idling around the chuck wagon where the cook was making coffee. As Van rode past she called to him, "Rest your saddle, amigo, while you drink a cup of coffee with me—over there in the shade away from the wagon and the flies."

The prospect was pleasing though Van knew work would lag if he stopped. The old riders seemed especially lazy to-day. He mentioned this to the girl as he dismounted and followed her to the scant shade of some jackpines.

"I guess they're peeved because they can't go to Wolf Trail for the Fourth of July celebration," she said. "Big doings this year. Contest riding and such this afternoon, and fireworks and a dance in the town hall this evening."

"And I guess," said Van enviously, "you're fixin' to go with your best beau." He knew she must have had dozens of beaux before the Wingos became so unpopular; surely one of them would be man enough to flaunt public opinion for to-day's big event.

"Why," replied Sally Lou artlessly, "I didn't know you intended going, Van!" Then, as she became aware of his look of amazement and dawning hope, her color mounted furiously, but her head was high. "I—I guess I sure enough tipped my hand. But I don't care! I mean—well, the past few weeks have shown me that you have decency and courage and brains. Those things in a man make him just about my ideal, if you want to know."

Van tossed away his coffee, cup and all. "That bein' the case—" He couldn't say any more. There was something funny the matter with his throat. He kept wanting to swallow and could not. His eyes stung. He opened his arms and they wrapped themselves around that slender, yielding form. He bent his head and his lips found Sally Lou's sweet mouth.

After a while the pounding in his ears, which he had dimly thought was the sound of hoofbeats, identified itself as the pulse of an idling motor. Van's soaring soul hit the dust with a thud as a crisp voice cleaved through his bliss.

"Well, Sally Lou," the sheriff snapped from her car, "so *this* is your way of making the foreman like his job? To think that I'd live to see the day when my daughter would stoop—"

Sally Lou twisted about in Van's arms. "Mother!" she protested.

Sheriff Wingo ignored the girl. "And you, Brent! I thought it was understood that you were not, in any way, to presume on the circumstances which made my daughter's company so available to you."

Van put Sally Lou carefully aside. He walked to the car, his face livid. "Lady, sheriff or not—" he choked. "If

you was only a man," he began again.

"Which I'm not, thank the Lord," the sheriff cut in fervently. "Sally Lou, get into this car immediately! Obey me!"

"Mother, wait! You don't understand—"

"I understand too well, I'm afraid. Get into this car!" Sally Lou got in.

"Your intention," the sheriff continued, "to secure a competent foreman was praiseworthy" —she turned a bitter face to Van—"but the method of keeping him on the job is contemptible."

"You insinuatin'," Van asked, "that just to get me to stay, Sally Lou was—triflin', kinda?"

"To a person of any intelligence," said the sheriff grimly, engaging the clutch, "that question would be unnecessary."

The car was moving. Van leaned over, shut off the ignition and pulled the hand brake. His eyes were dangerous but his voice was steady.

"Just a minute, ma'am! I ain't claimin' no great amount of intelligence, but what I have got tells me to get Sally Lou's sayso on this here. How about it, Sally Lou?"

The girl looked at the sheriff and the man through tear-filled eyes. "Mother, you're—cruel."

"I'm sensible. Young man, stand aside!"

"Not noways—yet. Sally Lou?"

"Oh, Van, don't think too harshly of Mother. Things are worrying her. Don't look at me like that, Mother; I'm not telling anything everybody in the county doesn't know and that's that you're afraid you can't hold those two Chimney Gulch prisoners in the Wolf Trail jail. She's darling when she's not worried, Van. And I wasn't just flirting with you, Van. I truly love you. I think you're—wonderful."

The sheriff declared bitterly, "You don't know what you're talking about! You may think he's indispensable but you should know, from what I've had to contend with since I've held office, that no man is wonderful. For Sally Lou's sake I wish you were, Brent, but also for Sally Lou's sake I'm going to show her you're not even indispensable. I haven't my check book with me, but if you'll ride into the home place this evening your money will be there for you. Now stand aside, please."

"Van, don't go," cried Sally Lou, "Van, I can't—"

The rest of it was lost in a grinding of gears as the car leaped forward. Van turned to find old Tex grinning at his side. "The Wolf's tamed, huh? Tamed. Hell, he's downed and his hide's pegged out to dry!" Tex snickered.

Van was tired of making it clear that he did not hit women or knock down men old enough to be his father, so he merely said, as he turned over the herd, "Kindly go to hell with this here herd, hombre. I'm through."

Then he set out for the home place. He hated to go near it, but each moment he was thinking of new and better things to tell the sheriff; and he *had* to see Sally Lou. If she really meant what she said about loving him —well, they needn't starve. He had the price of his Arizona ranch and he could always get work.

It was sundown by the time he reached the Wingo ranch, only to find the ladies absent. They had gone to the dance at Wolf Trail, Annie said. To Van that meant only one thing, the sheriff feared to let the girl see him again.

Van did not stop for his check, nor to catch up a fresh horse; he burned the wind to town. It was very late when he reached there but he had no difficulty in locating the town hall. It was ablaze with lights in its upper story windows and it stood like a beacon in the darkness of the moonless night. One wing of it was low and built of stone—the jail, he supposed. Next to that was another brightly lighted building; that would be the Red Elephant gambling place where the Wingo men were killed.

The lower floor of the town hall had a light burning only just inside the door, dimly revealing an L-shaped corridor with dark offices on each side of it. But as Van mounted the stairs he absently noted a lighted transom beyond the corridor's turn.

The upper floor was crowded with dancers who had reached the boisterous stage, but neither Sally Lou nor her mother was anywhere in sight. Van finally asked a rider if he had seen the sheriff in the hall that evening.

"Try the Red Elephant, hombre," the man advised. "Hell has broke loose there to-night and a sheriff's sure needed. But maybe the lady's just keepin' her eye peeled from the safety of the hotel across the street. Saw her there about an hour ago."

Van was halfway down the stairs when the door with the lighted transom opened and he heard Sally Lou's voice. He went jingling toward it. At the same moment there was the sound of gunfire in the street and bedlam broke loose on the floor above, echoed by bedlam from the Red Elephant.

Van reached the lighted room right then and collided with the sheriff coming out. She stepped back a pace and a woman, strange to Van, grasped her by the arm. "Don't go, Mrs. Wingo! It's a trap, I tell you!"

"Mother, *please* be sensible," begged Sally Lou, who was right behind the sheriff.

The confusion and noise increased. Men clumped down the stairs. Someone yelled, "Where's the sheriff?" That was answered by a derisive laugh.

Van stepped inside the room, closed the door and stood with his back to it. "Now, what's all this?" he shouted. "What do you mean, trap?"

The sheriff said, "Young man, how many times do I have to tell you to stand out of my way? I'm putting a stop to this fracas if I die doing it. Get away from that door!"

Sally Lou cried, "Stay put, Van! Mrs. Wilson here—she's the jailer—thinks there's more to this than we know. She fears someone's trying to stage a jail-break, taking advantage of the big crowd and the dark night. Remember my telling you about a scheme to get two prisoners we have here out of the jail at Chimney Gulch? Mother spoiled that plan. Now Mrs. Wilson's afraid that the row at the Red Elephant is just a bluff to get everybody interested in it and forget the jail. Besides, there's a deputy—"

"Bluff or not," the sheriff cut in, "I must try to stop it." Her face was gray. Van wondered if she was thinking of her husband and son killed in a Red Elephant shooting. "I—"

"I sure do wish you ladies'd quit talkin' all at once and let a feller think. Maybe I could do somethin' about this here," exclaimed Van.

"For the last time," the sheriff spoke with authority, "I ask you to let me pass. I told you to-day that I did not consider you indispensable; now you're unnecessary."

"Is that so? Well— Listen!" Van put his ear to the door panel. "I hear a scrapin' sort of sound from the end of this here runway."

"That's the jail door. It sticks," whispered the lady jailer. "It opens on this corridor. Whoever's doing the breaking will have to come this way. It's the only way. Only a child could get out the slits of windows.

"Oh, I mistrusted that Cal deputy, Sheriff," she went on, "when he came fanning into my quarters a few minutes ago, saying you wanted to see me at the hotel. He's probably pulling down plenty of money for getting me out of the way. And if you hadn't stopped in here looking for your gun—"

The sheriff seemed to shrink within her clothes; she looked bleak and tired and defeated. That look of defeat and Sally Lou's hopeless face were the last things Van saw before he wrenched a leg off the table—he was unarmed and the sheriff would not give up her gun—and switched off the light. He was no longer employee or lover; he was the embodiment of that male instinct

which protects the weaker of its kind.

With infinite caution he opened the door and oozed out to the darkened hallway, cursing the faint jingle of his spurs, but trusting to luck that the sound would not be detected. Down the hall he crept, as a killer wolf closes in on its prey. He crouched as he neared the slowly opening jail door. He sprang, with uplifted table leg, as a man's form appeared. He struck. "One—two— Yipee!"

Lights appeared, and many people. Sally Lou, the lady jailer and the lady sheriff crowded close to him. "Say, ma'am," he shouted—he had to shout to be heard above the hubbub and the pounding in his ears— "how many prisoners you got in your old jail, anyway? I'll bust the heads of all and sundry if—"

"Don't howl so, Brent!" The sheriff spoke with renewed authority, but she beamed at him.

"I guess he can howl if he wants to!" Sally Lou slipped her arm through his. "I guess he's a wild wolf and this is his night to howl. He's also," she added firmly, "indispensable and wonderful. Isn't he, Mother?"

"Well, he'll do for a deputy."

"Or a son-in-law, ma'am?" asked Van.

"Or a son-in-law, Van," replied the sheriff.

MEMBERS OF TRAIL'S END

Whose pictures appear on pages 146 and 147

PAGE 146

FIRST ROW—*left to right*—Flora Arnold, Vesta, Wash.; Marvin Wooten, New Providence, Iowa; Lydia Brooks, West Winfield, N. Y.

SECOND ROW—*left to right*—J. Montealegre, San Francisco, Calif.; Alice Brandt, Reedsburg, Wisc.; Rudy Merrick, Los Angeles, Calif.

THIRD ROW—*left to right*—Elsie Miller, Sacramento, Calif.; Virgil B. Adair and Robert Jackson, Veedersburg, Ind.; Dorothy Skibrek, Stoughton, Wisc.

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FIRST ROW—*left to right*—Jottie Schoolcraft, Llano, Texas; Edward Price, Nova Scotia, Canada; Eleanore A. Johns, Lavelle, Pa.

SECOND ROW—*left to right*—Greydon Weller, Rochester, N. Y.; John Meeko, N. Catasauqua, Pa.; Arthur W. Gowing, Springfield, Mass.

THIRD ROW—*left to right*—Ethel Pearson, Las Vegas, Nev.; Harry Coffelt, and friend, Ft. Harvard, Md.; Virginia C. Crever, St. Joseph, Minn.

The Bandit Of Bayhorse Basin

A FIVE-PART ROMANCE OF THE FIGHTING WEST

By Frank C. Robertson

PART TWO

WHEN Brock Morgan rode into Bayhorse Basin, he knew that his life would be in danger every moment, in that lawless country. But Brock had a mission there, and he meant to face out whatever the future might bring. His two friends, George and John Bennett, had been done to death in this place by a murderous gang, the John Doe Brotherhood, which struck unseen and which had never been brought to justice. He had come to avenge the Bennetts.

Riding in with his two faithful horses, which he called Buck and Brogan, Brock met up immediately with two men. One was obviously a deadly enemy who guessed his purpose there, Heber Jex, the man who controlled affairs in the basin. His nephew, Claude Bransom, was with the latter. Heber Jex warned Brock that strangers were not wanted in the basin.

Later, going to the post office, Brock met lovely Mildred Bates and her father. Old Bates' mind was slipping, and while he was not a John Doe renegade, he believed the Bennett boys had been crooks, as they had been represented by the brotherhood, and that Brock was also an outlaw. Mildred believed this too, but begged Brock to leave before they killed him.

Brock received the impression that Mildred and young Bransom were lovers, and he found out that Heber Jex was also in love with her and might do away with his young nephew at any time. He decided to help Mildred and Claude, and found that he could count on Bransom in a fight.

Brock met the first attack of Heber

Jex successfully, worsting him in a grim hand-to-hand battle, and he outwitted the John Does the first time they surrounded his camp, in an attempt to eliminate him immediately. However, they took away his favorite old horse, Brogan, and he had to face them single-handed to prevent harm coming to his equine pal. He was captured by a ruse of the gang, and found himself in the merciless grasp of men who were looking forward to his death with satisfaction and glee.

CHAPTER IX

"John Doe Will Git Him"

BROCK was quickly made to realize that he was dealing with coarse-fibered men who were utterly without sympathy. They hustled him down to their camp as soon as Kurg and Wolfe had recovered their guns, and discussed the proper method in which to prevent his escaping.

Tappet departed immediately, and the remaining men got into an argument about whether to sit up the remainder of the night to guard their prisoner, or whether to tie him up some way so that they could get their sleep. The latter course was finally agreed upon.

"Why lose our sleep when he ain't got a Chinaman's chance tuh git away?" Wolfe demanded. "I can fix him so he can't move without wakin' me, an' if he tries any funny business I'll bore him with a bullet."

As he spoke, the fellow picked up the free end of the lasso rope that was already around Brock's body, and jerked it tighter, pinning his hands firmly to his side. Then instead of tying a knot, the man dropped two more coils around his victim a little higher up on the arms, and, running the end of the rope under the coils at the back, made them fast with a couple of half hitches.

All this time Kurg was intimidating Brock with a gun. They ordered him to lie down upon Tappet's vacated blankets, and then Wolfe threw a loop around Brock's ankles and bent his feet back almost to his knees and tied them there. Then the fellow lay down in his own blankets four feet away, pulled the rope tight and wrapped it around his own body.

"Now feller, yo're welcome tuh all the sleep yuh can git," he chuckled. "But don't wiggle around an' wake me up because I'm kinda touchy when woke out of a sound sleep, an' I'll shore put a pair o' bullets inter yore carcass before yuh have time tuh think."

"I'll sleep over here on the other side of him," Kurg said matter-of-factly.

Brock's position was uncomfortable in the extreme, but he remained perfectly motionless until he knew the men were asleep, and that was not soon. It seemed that they would never get through talking to each other. But at last their deep breathing told him they were asleep, and they certainly entertained no idea that he might be able to escape.

Nor was Brock himself by any means sure that he was going to do it, but he did intend to make the attempt. He had one factor in his favor to start with. Wolfe had used plenty of rope to tie him with, but a smarter man would have used less rope and made better knots. The knots were secure enough, but by straining his arms hard against the first loop around him, Brock had been able to get a little slack when he brought his arms close to his sides, and with so much rope in use there had to be a little slack elsewhere.

Then he began to work one arm upward beneath the rope. His shoulder cramped, and he had to straighten the arm again, but he had worked the rope looser. On the second attempt he freed his right arm though the knuckles were skinned and bleeding. It had been a terriffic strain, but he knew that there would be no hope for him if he was still a prisoner when the John Does came. Though he tried to keep his mind from dwelling upon it, the thought of being hung was terrifying,

and he could feel the cold sweat breaking out over his body.

Now that he had one arm free it was comparatively easy to withdraw the other. He had to work painfully and slowly, for there was always the chance that an inadvertent pull might awaken his captors.

With his hands free, Brock succeeded in working the coils around until the knots were in front of him. Had he had a knife the job would have been easy, but his captors had relieved him of his pocket knife.

There was no rope end available, so the knots couldn't be untied, but he could manipulate them to a certain extent, and so by tightening one to loosen another, he succeeded in working the three coils down over his hips until he could straighten out his legs. It was an easy matter then to reach down and loosen the lower half hitches enough to slip them over his feet.

Despite his extreme care he had several times given the rope a little jerk and each time it had brought Wolfe up on one elbow. But seeing the prisoner still lying there, the fellow had gone back to sleep.

Finally, with the first long breath he had dared to breathe, Brock was free, although he still had to make his escape. He would have liked to make a try for a gun, but realized that it would be fatal. If he got away at all he would be lucky.

Buck had been turned loose close to the camp, and old Brogan was with him, of course. For some time Brock had heard the constant nibbling of grass by a pair of horses, and he was almost sure that they were his own. As they were only a few rods away, he decided to try to crawl to them. He had slipped out of the blankets and crawled back a distance of perhaps ten feet, when suddenly Kurg raised himself on one elbow and bellowed in his deep voice, "What's that?"

Instantly Wolfe raised up and Brock knew that discovery was imminent. He jumped up and ran.

Wolfe's indignant yell over the trickery that had been practiced upon him was drowned by the roar of Kurg's gun. The bullet sang by Brock's head with an ominous croon, and others were to follow it. But the cowboy's long legs had never before covered so much territory in a given time. He was calling to his horses as he ran.

Brock could go up to either of the horses at any time or place, but with the shooting going on Buck had decided that the location was unhealthy for him, and, throwing up his tail, he dashed away precipitately. Brogan, not willing to be again separated from his companion, followed suit, and after them sprinted Brock, his soothing calls richly interspersed with colorful curses.

The two outlaws followed for a short distance, their bullets stabbing through the darkness after the fugitive, but they had better means of pursuit than a foot race after their shots had failed to bring their man down.

They had night horses tied a short distance from camp, all saddled and bridled for any emergency, but by the time they were mounted, the sound of Brock's retreat was growing dim in the distance.

Kurg and Wolfe dashed by within two rods of the hiding man in hot pursuit of the horses. Brock knew his pets would not run far after the shooting ceased, but he decided not to move until he found out whether the men were going to catch them or not. The hiding place he had fallen into was as likely to be safe as any other.

His hope that the men would let his horses alone when they found he was not still in pursuit of them, was blasted when he heard them coming back up the canyon with a rope around Buck's neck, while Wolfe hazed Brogan along.

"He's hidin' in the brush somewheres, but there ain't no sense o' wastin' time huntin' him," he heard Kurg say.

"If we keep him from gittin' a horse it won't be hard locatin' him in the mornin'," Wolfe laughed.

"If we can't do that he'll deserve his liberty," Kurg boomed gruffly. "But John Doe will git him." Then they passed beyond earshot.

Brock knew that Kurg had stated the case correctly, and he knew that it was going to be a serious business for him to get out of the mountains with a band of determined men looking for him. It behooved him to be moving. Daybreak was not an hour away.

"I love horses, an' I love pets," he murmured as he hobbled away. "I'd do anything for them pet horses o' mine, but I want somebody tuh shoot me in both heels if I ever own a pet horse again."

CHAPTER X

"Mebbe I'll Get Myself Hung"

BROCK decided that the best thing he could do was to get as far from the outlaw camp as he could before daylight and then find a hiding place for the day. It would mean a long, tiresome wait, but patience was his chief stock in trade, and he knew that the chances of being discovered would be greatly lessened by such action.

At the best his situation was none too promising. Even though he avoided immediate capture he would be a long way from getting entirely out of danger. So far as he knew, there was not a settlement nor even a ranch closer than the town of Red Rock some seventy miles away, save in Bayhorse Basin. To make his way there on foot, unarmed, and without food, was a prospect that made him shudder. And, characteristically, he resolved against it. Bayhorse Basin was much nearer, and he would go there though it was running over with enemies. But he would go cautiously.

Meantime, he had to find his hiding place and avoid leaving tracks—no easy matter, considering his high-heeled boots. Yet when the sun came up the sore and bruised cowpuncher was ensconced, not uncomfortably, under a thicket of chaparral high up on a hillside a mile or more from the scene of his recent misadventure.

Most of Brock's hard journey had been made in his sock feet and he was in no hurry to draw on his boots again. He composed himself as best he could for a few hours of much-needed rest. Such was the strength of his will power that he forced himself to lie perfectly quiet and to relax until his eyes closed in sleep.

He was awakened by a shout that sounded perilously close. A repetition of it a few minutes later let him know that the shouter was on the other side of the canyon, and the man was answered by another on top of the ridge just above his hiding place.

"He's not around here unless he's hidin' in the chaparral, an' it'd take bloodhounds tuh git him outa there if he is," the second man had yelled. Brock believed that it was the man Tappet.

"Come on over, then," said the first shouter. "Looks like he's got away from here, but he'll have tuh hit for Red Rock an' we'll grab him before he gits that far." That voice sounded familiar, and, parting the bushes, Brock made out the athletic figure of his chief enemy, Heber Jex.

"Yuh hung the Bennett boys, an' yuh thought yuh'd have a party at my expense, but the chief actor wasn't there," Brock gritted to himself. "But this is due tuh go on till one of us settles on our last homestead."

He knelt, peering out like a wary old coyote while the two men came together, and presently they were joined by several other men. Jex appeared to be giving directions, and then they all rode away together—a little too ostentatiously.

Brock was much too wise to risk moving too soon. The whole thing had the earmarks of an attempt to lure him into showing himself. He wondered if the same little act had not been repeated several times that morning. It was now nearly noon.

"Right here I stick till dark," he told his invisible enemies, and settled himself again to sleep, which he did fitfully throughout the afternoon.

With the coming of darkness the fugitive crawled out and shook the leaves and grass out of his hair. A sadder looking sight would have been hard to imagine. His face was still discolored from the effects of the blows he had received in his two fist fights with Heber Jex, and, in places, ugly-looking scabs were beginning to form. To add to his unlovely appearance was a three-day growth of stubbly, reddish beard.

His hands and wrists were also badly skinned and bruised, and he felt just as bad inwardly as he looked outwardly. A gnawing hunger caused him to growlingly threaten to eat the ears off the first person he encountered, while the stiffness in his limbs made him move at a slow, awkward gait.

He was heading back toward Bayhorse Basin and the old Bennett ranch. If they had not found his camp, he would be able to get food and that was his primary consideration now.

It was a lame and weary puncher who staggered through the barbed wire fence a long time after midnight. He had thought some of stopping at the house, for the riders had left some provisions there. They had given up the place for fear it might be watched. It was a mile farther to where he had left his own things, but it was a lot safer there. He went on.

Fighting his way through the brush was a nightmare and he could not be at all sure that he could find the place after dark. At last, however, he knew that the little cleared spot where he had camped was just ahead. Eager as he was, he reconnoitered carefully before he approached the willows where he had thrust his meager belongings out of sight. Somebody might have located it, unlikely as that seemed, and might perhaps be watching for him to come back to it. When he was within ten feet of it he saw that it had been found.

For a long minute Brock stood motionless and regarded what lay before him. He had left things in a neat pile with a tarpaulin spread over it all. Now everything was scattered about for a radius of a rod, and trampled into the ground. With a sick feeling inside of him Brock stepped out and regarded what was left of his property.

The story was written there plainly. No human maurauder had done this. The ground had been deep trodden by a bunch of cattle. Not a thing edible remained. In many ways it was the hardest blow the puncher had yet received. Everything else could be attributed to human agencies, but this made it seem almost as though fate itself was against him, and for the first time his faith that some way or other he would be able to wiggle through was badly shaken.

It was not hard to imagine how the havoc had been wrought. The cattle had happened along that way and doubtless been attracted by the smell of the salt he carried in his grub sack. Some adventurous bull, or steer, had got close enough to discover that there was no human around and had horned the things around until they were scattered, and had perhaps broken the salt sack. Then the rest had rushed up and in their salt hunger had trampled things to ruin.

Brock's sense of humor was the only thing that saved him from despair. "Now I *will* eat the ears off the first man I meet," he remarked with a twisted grin as he turned and trudged on.

The cowboy was actuated by a grim and indomitable purpose—to bring to justice the murderers of his friends—but he had the sense to realize that a starving man could do nothing in the deadly game he had set out to play, no matter how firm his determination might be.

To go back to the Bennett house was to take a double chance; one that his foes might be there, the other that there would be no food even though

the place was vacant. And Brock was not one to retrace his steps uselessly.

There remained just one other place to go.

"Mebbe I'll git myself hung, but I bet I'll git some breakfast first," he said to himself.

Thereupon he turned his weary footsteps toward the Bayhorse Post Office.

CHAPTER XI

"This Man Must Die"

THERE had been little rest for Mildred Bates in the two nights since she had tried to leave home. Her first alarm over her father's condition had somewhat subsided, since his condition did not grow worse. True, he remained in bed and she had to attend to his every need, but he showed no signs of collapse as she had feared. Nevertheless, she recognized that as long as he remained in that condition she could not think about leaving the basin.

She had thought and worried much about Brock Morgan. After what he had told her of his reasons for invading the basin she knew that he would not leave, and that sooner or later he would fall a victim of the John Does seemed certain. Fear that harm would come to this kindly-faced cowpuncher was the greatest worry she had ever known.

If the man was what he claimed, then the Bennetts were innocent men and they had been brutally murdered. Whether he was a John Doe or not, Andrew Bates had approved of the lynching, and urged his neighbors on. He couldn't avoid some responsibility. Her very soul was seared whenever she thought of it. Still, she tried in her mind to defend her father on the ground that he was a victim of hallucinations, and had come under the influence of Heber Jex. Again and again she tried to figure out what Jex's motive was, but without success.

That her father was sincere in his belief that the Vigilantes were necessary to maintain law and order, she was quite sure. That he was badly mistaken she was just as sure. It all seemed to turn upon Jex. For some reason or other Jex was keeping the John Does active. That was part of the mystery that bothered her. The other part was why the man was so determined to make her marry him.

Mildred knew that Jex was not in love with her, and he had never made any real attempt to come courting. In fact he seemed satisfied to let her father bring influence to bear upon her. But his cold sureness that he was going to get her had something of the inevitable about it, and it terrified her. If she had money she could have understood it, for Jex was the personification of greed, but she did not have a cent.

Jex had one overmastering ambition that she knew about. Only once had she heard him talk about it, and then he had talked to her. But from the intensity of his conversation she knew that he was giving utterance to a dream that dominated his life. That it was a foolish dream did not deter him from talking about it as though it could really be accomplished. In brief, that dream was to turn the whole Bayhorse Basin into one vast cattle ranch over which he, of course, would have dominion.

"If one man owned everything in here he could be the biggest cattle king in the whole country," he had affirmed with gleaming eyes. "These little cattlemen in here are good enough fellows, but they keep themselves and everybody else from expanding. If it was all under one head, twice as many cattle could be wintered and I could get a monopoly on the whole range. It would be a million dollar proposition! Bigger, even."

"I guess nobody around here will ever have money enough to do that," she had ventured.

"Don't be too sure," he had said, and he had not laughed. "If I ever marry a rich woman I'll have it, and the woman

won't be sorry either." Then he had laughed a little.

"You'd better set about finding her," she had said.

"I have," he told her and his eyes fairly burned into her flesh.

She had tried to feel relieved by convincing herself that he really would not want to marry until he found an heiress, but he had quickly undeceived her about that. No doubt, she thought, he had too much sense to think that he could ever find a woman with a fortune, who would marry him. His dream, she knew, however, still lived.

The next morning after Brock's departure Jex had stopped at the post office for an interview with Andrew Bates. When he left he told Mildred, who had kept out of his way until then, that Brock Morgan had been caught trying to steal Jex's saddle cavvy. The man had smiled sardonically, and the girl, though speechless with horror, knew what it meant. Other men of the neighborhood had drifted by during the morning, and each one had talked in low tones with her father and they had all departed with grim, set faces.

She knew that the John Doe Brotherhood would be meeting that night for the purpose of dealing with Brock Morgan as they had with the Bennetts. Unable to stand it longer, she went in and confronted Andrew Bates.

"Father," she said nervously, "you must stop this thing somehow. There mustn't be another lynching to disgrace the basin."

"You keep out of this," Bates rasped in his fanatical voice. "You don't know anything about it. There has got to be a stop put to this outlawry. This man must die. If I was well—"

She rushed away abruptly. Appeals, she knew, would be wasted. If anything was done to save the stranger she must do it. But how? She looked out and saw Bramble grazing in the pasture. Could she ride out to Red Rock and bring the sheriff quickly enough to avert the tragedy? It was a hundred and forty miles there and back, and Bramble was slow. She would not know where to tell the sheriff to go when they got back, and if Morgan was already a prisoner it would be too late.

Reluctantly she gave up the idea, principally because she was convinced of the futility of getting the sheriff to do anything even though she should be in time.

Then soon after noon a man came from the other way and imparted the news that the stranger had made his escape the previous night. A wave of thankfulness swept the girl from head to foot, but the effect upon her father was just the opposite. His face mottled with anger, and for a moment it looked as if he might leap from his bed. Mildred restrained him with a firm hand upon his shoulder.

"If they don't get that man, this country will be overrun with outlaws as it was in the old days," he screamed.

"They'll git him, all right," the man said. "He's unarmed and on foot. There's only two trails out of the basin, and both of 'em are bein' watched."

Bates became more tranquil, while Mildred was again in the grip of despair. If there were only someone she could discuss her troubles with, she thought, it would not be so bad. There was only one such person in the basin, and that was Claude Bransom. She knew that he had been forbidden to visit her, and if he failed to heed the command, terrible things might happen to him.

Two other men passed the post office that afternoon. One was Gid Whitmore, the man she had been led to believe was the actual head of the John Doe Brotherhood, a stern, unbending man with a surly disposition and without a trace of a sense of humor. The other was a squint-eyed, shifty-looking fellow by the name of Sam Wallace, but in Mildred's eyes rather the least unlikable of the Bayhorse ranchers. Once each week Wallace, or his tall, gangling son, carried the mail from Red Rock to Bayhorse.

The men reported to Andrew Bates that there was no immediate prospect of the stranger being caught. What they feared, Gid Whitmore declared, was that the man might have accomplices who would come in and help him to escape. Wallace didn't share this opinion.

"If he had pals he wouldn't have tried tuh run them horses off alone," he argued.

"I think that's right," Bates agreed. "Probably the fellow learned that the brotherhood was too strong, and decided to make as much of a haul as he could when he left."

"Anyway, I bet he's got a gang back of him," Whitmore said stubbornly. "An' that ain't all. I'm convinced that he's got a spy right here in the basin."

"Impossible!" Bates snorted.

"I'm not so sure. Heb tells me that that nephew of his'n was kinda thick with them Bennetts. An' how did that feller know where Heb's men would be camped if he wasn't told. Claude Bransom was the only man beside Heb who knew, because Heb sent him down there tuh tell 'em where tuh camp. An' Heb says that feller went up the creek after he left here."

"Then the brotherhood had better keep an eye on Claude Bransom," Andrew Bates said solemnly.

The men had gone into Bates' bedroom, and had left the door open. From where she was at work Mildred could hear every word. They made no attempt to prevent being overheard. Her heart had turned stone cold at this prospect of another victim of the John Does, this one the boy who had been almost the only friend she had ever known. It seemed to her that the hearts of all three of these men must be black with murder.

"What about Heb?" Sam Wallace demanded.

"Heb has said many a time that he'd hang his own son, if he had one, if he ever turned outlaw," Whitmore declared. "An' somethin' has gotta be done. Stealin' didn't stop when we hung the Bennetts. I know I've lost cattle this summer, an' if I lose many more I'll be broke by fall."

"That's about my fix," Wallace added. "It does look like mebbe Claude Bransom was in with them outlaws. He's ambitious, an' say—" The man suddenly lowered his voice so that Mildred couldn't hear, but she knew what he had said the next moment as her father roared:

"I'll put a stop to that. I know how to handle that girl. She's going to marry Heber."

"Well, yuh'd better be havin' her doin' it, because wimmin are damn queer," Gid Whitmore advised dryly, and the men left.

The girl's mind was in a turmoil. Evidently the men were sincere in declaring that they had been losing cattle. This stranger, Brock Morgan, might be an outlaw, despite her trust in him, but she knew that Claude Bransom wasn't. Without a doubt Heber Jex was deliberately, cold-bloodedly, stirring up hostility and suspicion against Claude, to serve his own ends.

Then she began to understand. He was taking the most diabolical way in the world to make her marry him. He was underhandedly making these fanatical John Does believe that Claude was a rustler. He would get them in the frame of mind to lynch Claude, but he would see to it that he retained the power to save him. Then he would give her her option; marry Heber Jex or have Claude done to death by the John Does!

If it came to that, the girl knew what she would do. She would rather marry Heber Jex, much as she hated him, than to see Claude murdered.

The irony of it was that she was not in love with Claude, and she didn't believe that he was with her. She was almost two years older than he. They had been friends in childhood; almost like brother and sister. When Heb Jex first began to annoy her with his attentions she had turned to Claude as a protector. The boy had suggested that

they pretend to be sweethearts as a foil against his uncle—and this was the result.

Mildred went to bed reluctantly, and it was a long time before she went to sleep. Not only was she sick with dread on account of Claude, but there was constantly a picture in her mind of Brock Morgan being hunted down like a wild animal by men whose sole desire was to kill.

Finally she fell into a half doze, but such sleep as she had was troubled. Once she dreamed that the house was surrounded by men led by Gid Whitmore, who was demanding that her father come out and be hung. She had locked the doors, but they were breaking them down. She could hear the blows—

Suddenly she sat bolt upright in bed with a stifled scream. She was confused. She was awake, but the dream still lingered. Somebody was trying to break the door down! A moment later she quieted enough to realize that what she had taken for ax blows was somebody knocking steadily but insistently upon the kitchen door.

"Hey! Who's there?" she heard her father rasp out angrily.

There was no reply, but the knocking continued. Hastily throwing a wrap about her, Mildred passed into the kitchen. It was now daylight so that she did not require a lamp, but her blood congealed as she reached the door. There was something uncanny about that knocking. Dared she open the door?

"Who is it?" she whispered hoarsely.

"It's me—Brock Morgan," was the husky reply. "Hate tuh bother yuh, but I got some vacant room in my tummy that has just naturally gotta be filled."

With trembling fingers the girl unfastened the door, and the sadly bedraggled figure of the cowpuncher staggered inside. There was a grin on his bruised face that was grotesque rather than repulsive, but the girl was still frightened.

"Don't be alarmed, miss," he said. "I mean no harm."

"Oh! Oh!" she gasped with mingled pity and alarm.

"Who is that?" suddenly snapped out the suspicious voice of Andrew Bates.

CHAPTER XII

"I'm Just That Mean"

FOR a moment Mildred was paralyzed with fear. Her eyes dilated with terror as she heard the sharp, querulous tones of inquiry. The calmness of the man who had come for succor was the only thing that kept her from complete panic.

"Don't be afraid," he told her.

"Hush! He mustn't know who it is," she gasped.

"Just as yuh say," Brock said quietly. "I don't want tuh git you into no trouble, but he's bed-ridden, ain't he?"

"Yes, but people will be stopping in to see him, and if he knows you are here he'll tell them. You must go away."

"All right—just so I git some breakfast."

"Mildred! Who's in there? I wanta know," screeched Andrew Bates.

The girl hastily went into the room where her father was. "Don't make so much fuss," she said with a pretense of irritation. "It's just a passing prospector who wants to buy some supplies."

"Send him in here. I want to take a look at him," Bates snarled.

"I won't do that, Father," Mildred said steadily, though she was pale. "I won't insult a stranger just to gratify your foolish whims."

His hands plucked at the bedclothes as though he were of a mind to throw them off and arise despite his illness, but he subsided with an angry gurgle. There was, however, a menacing glitter in his eyes as the girl went out. And no sooner had the door closed behind Mildred than he threw back the covers and put his bare feet on the floor. Furtively crossing the room, he

pressed his ear hard against the door.

"I'll get you something to eat, and then you must go away immediately," Mildred said tensely to Brock. "He's suspicious. If he was able to get out of bed I think he would summon the John Does now."

"See here, miss, why should yore old man have it in for me like this? I've never harmed him any."

"I don't know—yes, I do. It—it's because he is such a terribly good man. He hates evil so much that he becomes incredibly evil himself in order to stamp it out. Oh, I know you can't understand. It's fanatical, but there is no changing him. He would gloat over seeing you hanged," Mildred explained jerkily.

"Still, I can't see why he has such a dislike fer the length o' my neck," Brock objected.

"He knows you are a horse thief, and that is enough for him."

"Oh, he does, does he?"

"You stay there behind the stove while I cook your breakfast, and then you must get away from here," Mildred said. "But don't try to get to Red Rock, because the John Does are watching both the trails. If you hadn't escaped from those men you would have been hung last night."

"Yeah, I reckon so," Brock grunted. "They shore seem to have it in for me."

"If I could help you, I would," Mildred said impulsively. "Not that I believe in your innocence, but because I hate this John Doe organization and its lynching business. But I can't do anything except feed you and help you leave here."

"I reckon now that if the sheriff was tuh come after me yuh'd give me up to him," he commented.

Mildred started to say that she would, but something in the level gray eyes then focused upon her made her hesitate. Bedraggled as his injuries and recent hardships made him look, there was something so inherently honest in his straightforward gaze that she knew she couldn't surrender him.

"I should, but I don't think I would," she almost whispered, and the eyes of Brock Morgan looked his gratitude.

"If I can have some water tuh clean up while yuh're gittin' some breakfast I'll appreciate it," he said mildly.

Mildred proceeded to build a fire and when the water in the tea-kettle was heated a little she poured some into a basin for Brock, and then supplied him with clean washrags. By the time he had finished she had the breakfast nearly ready, and she had to admit that he looked stronger and more like himself already. There was no more conversation between them, as Mildred wanted to make her father think the visitor had left the premises.

While Brock was ravenously devouring the food she had cooked for him, Mildred went into her father's room with a tray and found Andrew Bates lying quietly in bed, but she failed to note the triumphant glitter in his eyes. He had hung out the signal which he knew would soon bring Heber Jex or some of the other basin men.

"That man has gone?" he demanded crossly.

"Yes," she murmured.

"Listen, Mildred. Sam Walace said he had some medicine up at his place that would do me good. I want you to ride over and get it for me right away," Bates ordered.

"As—as soon as I can clear things up," Mildred promised.

"Don't wait. I'm suffering and I want relief right away," he stormed. "I had a terrible night."

"All right, I'll go as quickly as I can," she said. Until the last few days she had obeyed her parent's most unreasonable commands, and now her hesitation infuriated him. As she turned away he gazed at her with eyes which smoldered with hate. But in reality it was not Mildred he saw then, but a woman who had been almost the image of her—her mother.

"I'm going to fix you up some food that you can carry and that will last you a day or two," Mildred whispered

to Brock when she returned to the kitchen. "You must hide somewhere in the willows until night and then try to get away."

"Miss Bates, I've been hidin' out in the brush by day an' travelin' by night till I'm plumb fed up on it," Brock grinned. "Howsomever, I can stand a few hours sleep. As tuh the gittin' away part, I ain't changed my mind about locatin' here."

She stared at him incredulously. "Don't you realize that they will kill you?" she demanded. "If you must steal cattle and horses why don't you go some place where it'll be safer?"

"You think I'm a rustler?"

"I have to. I thought they might be mistaken about the Bennetts, until they caught you trying to drive those horses out of the country."

"Well, it looks like there wasn't no use tuh argue against evidence like that, an' right now I got no way tuh disprove it," he said slowly. "However, Miss Bates, yuh've been mighty kind, an' the fact that yuh think me a crook makes me appreciate it all the more. I'll be trekin' on before I git you into any more trouble."

"But won't you please leave the basin as soon as you can?" she insisted.

He shook his head. "I came here tuh avenge my friends, an' I don't leave until I do it," he said stubbornly. "There's just one thing I wanta say, miss. That is, the Bennett boys were never thieves. I'm not askin' yuh tuh believe in me yet—but if yuh'll go over to their house an' look at the picture of their mother that's still hangin' on the wall you'll know that sons of hers never could be crooks."

He had turned toward the door, ignoring the food Mildred was hastily putting up for him. The girl sprang in front of him.

"No," she said impulsively. "No matter what you are, I'm not going to turn you out in daylight where they'll be sure to find you. I can let you into my own room without my father knowing it. You'll be safer there to-day than any place else and you can rest. I've got to go away, but you'll be all right."

"I won't do that," Brock refused, "but I'll tell yuh what I will do. Yuh've got a stable out there, an' I'll camp there if yuh don't mind."

Mildred knew from his tone that there was no use in arguing. As for Brock, the only reason he was willing to remain near the post office was because he was contemplating his first crime—a theft of the rifle that he had seen in one corner of the post office den on the occasion of his first visit. The theft, however, he meant to be only temporary. The situation being what it was, he felt that it was imperative and justifiable to borrow a gun if he could, and this was the only one available.

Taking the package of food, he slipped out of the house and over to the small stable. It had not been used for some time and the manger was full of dry hay. Not such a bad bed considering what he had been enduring, he thought.

He did not, however, lie down immediately. Through a crack in the wall he watched for the next movements from the house. Soon he saw Mildred come out and call up her pony by offering him a pail of oats. She had told him she was going away and he entertained no fear of a double-cross on her part. Her father, however, was a different proposition altogether.

No sooner was Mildred out of sight than Brock cast a swift glance around and then headed back for the house. The back door had been left unlocked, and he made his entry that way.

He hoped he would be able to make his way from the kitchen to the front room without arousing Andrew Bates, but in any event he meant to have the rifle. Both bedrooms were to the left of the dining room; Mildred's close to the kitchen, and her father's room abutted on the north end of the front room. The doors of both bedrooms stood open, but there was nobody in either room.

With a grim smile on his face Brock stepped into the front room and stood there taking in everything with a keen glance. He made no sound.

He was alone in a house with a man presumably not able to leave his bed, but the bed, he saw, was empty. From the first he had been skeptical of Bates' illness, and when finally he tiptoed toward the door of the little coop that served as post office, it was with the utmost caution. The door stood ajar, and Brock was not greatly surprised to see the postmaster sitting there.

Andrew Bates was sitting at his desk with a ledger in front of him, and he appeared to be figuring frantically as though in fear of being interrupted. But of more interest to Brock was the .30-30 Winchester which he saw leaning against the wall a few feet behind Bates. With a cat-like tread Brock stepped inside and his fingers closed around the barrel of the gun. At that moment Andrew Bates chose to look up, and was for the first time aware of Brock's presence.

The furious look on the postmaster's face was ludicrous. "You—you—" he stammered incoherently. He had watched Brock Morgan enter the stable with a package of food, and felt sure that the man had gone there to hide for the day.

"I see yuh're suddenly better, Mr. Bates," Brock grinned sardonically.

Bates' thin fingers clutched spasmodically at the vacant air. He was unable to speak.

"Good gun yuh've got here," Brock said. "Mind if I borry it?"

Bates became less excited, and the fox-like cunning which sometimes characterized him, crept into his voice. "What do you want it for?" he demanded. "I don't make a habit of lending my things."

"Well, I lost my own rifle an' I wanted tuh borry this one till I found my own again—'fraid a chipmunk might leap up an' bite me if I trail around without a gun," Brock stated. "Seems like yore recovery has been plumb sudden, ain't it?" he added cheerfully.

"The state of my health doesn't concern you," Bates rasped. "What I want to know is what you are doing here?"

"Mebbe my health don't concern you any more than yores does me," Brock countered, "an' mine seems a heap more threatened than yores is. But yore daughter is losin' sleep an' worryin' herself sick about yore legs bein' paralyzed or somethin', an' yuh're lettin' her worry when there ain't a thing wrong with yuh. Now will you tell her yuh're all right, or will I have to?"

"I am a sick man," Bates half whimpered. "I can't stand excitement. Will you look in that drawer there and give me some medicine you'll find?"

The man was indeed trembling badly and his jaws were slack. Though suspecting a trick, Brock stepped over to the drawer and pulled it open. But his eyes never left Bates' face. Then he glanced down, but instead of medicine he saw only several piles of silver change, and a few sheets of postage stamps. "There's no medicine here," he declared.

"Go ahead—help yourself. You have my gun and I am helpless," Bates said bitterly.

Brock stepped away from the drawer as though it had burned him. His face blazed with anger. "Of all the contemptible old wretches I ever saw, yuh're the rottenest," he grated. "For less than one o' these stamps I'd give yuh a damn good spankin'. It's what yuh need."

Had somebody stepped in while he was looking into the cash drawer of the post office, with the postmaster's rifle in his hand, and the postmaster swearing that he had been overcome—as he knew Bates would swear—then there would have been no chance for him to disprove his guilt.

Brock knew the seriousness of tampering with Uncle Sam's postal service, and it would have meant a long term of years in prison. Even as it was, he

knew Bates was despicable enough to accuse him of the crime. And he realized, too, that Bates was possibly playing for time.

"All right, old boy," he said, as he started to back out of the room. "Yuh purty near pulled one off on me that time, but yuh'll drop that gag about havin' a stroke. If yuh're still pullin' it when I come back again yuh sure will have one—an' it'll be the stroke o' my hand right across the seat o' yore pants. I'm just that mean."

The cowpuncher straightened up with a jerk. Through the front window he had caught sight of three men dismounting before the post office. He knew that Bates had seen them, too!

CHAPTER XIII

A Tight Corner

FOR a moment Brock knew the sensation of being cornered. If he tried to leave the house, Andrew Bates would yell a warning to the men, and he would be in range of their guns before he could even reach the stable. Even if he should reach the first shelter, two of them could hold him there while the other went for more help, and he would be killed if he tried to leave. It was a situation requiring quick thinking and quicker acting.

He was sorely tempted to bring the butt of the rifle down across Bates' head before the venomous old man had a chance to do him further damage. But Bates was old and frail and incapable of physically defending himself. And after all he was Mildred's father, and the cowboy felt a queer compunction against doing anything that might possibly cause her grief or trouble.

However, Brock knew that he must silence Bates in some way. He sprang back into the office to one side of the pigeonhole window, and snapped the rifle up level with his waist, the barrel pointed at Bates.

"Not a word outa you, old man," he hissed. "I've stood for a lot from you, but there's a limit. One chirp from you will be just like callin' the undertaker."

Bates' jaw dropped and a reddish flush came over his face. He gripped the arms of his chair hard and half arose. Then, with a convulsive movement he subsided, and his color changed to a greenish pallor. His head was drawn over to the left in a strange, weird manner. But Brock's concern was only that the man did not cry out a warning.

A man's face appeared at the pigeonhole. "Y' in there, Andrew?" he asked.

There was no reply, and the fellow stuck his face into the aperture far enough to enable him to see Bates. He withdrew it like a squirrel popping into a hole. "Gawd, fellers, somethin's happened tuh Bates fer sure," he ejaculated.

With the others at his heels, the fellow rushed toward the door that opened into the post office from the side. Brock occupied a position over to the right, near another door. Bates was facing the door which the men were about to enter. It was natural, therefore, for the men to look straight at Bates when they came in, and to overlook Brock.

"What's the matter, Andrew?" the first man said with concern. "We seen yore sign, but we thought it had somethin' tuh do with that horse thief."

"Mebbe it has, if I'm the party yuh're referrin' to," Brock drawled.

The men whirled, their hands grasping instinctively for their guns. The rifle in Brock's hands swung from Bates to them, and on a level with their stomachs. Before the silent menace of the gun two of the men jerked their hands upward enough for him to see that they were not going to make any mistakes.

But the third man, with a quick step, sheltered himself behind the middle man and jerked out his gun. Brock was forced to act to save himself.

Desperate as was his plight, he couldn't bring himself to shoot the men who had thrown up their hands.

All he could see of the other fellow was a leg that was unprotected. He dropped the end of the rifle and pulled the trigger. The pop of the six-gun came an instant later and mingled with the still reverberating roar of the rifle. At the same time the owner of the six-shooter dropped to the floor with a broken leg.

The other two men, convinced that their uplifted hands would not save them, moved for their guns. Brock pumped out the empty cartridge, but no loaded one leaped up to take its place. He realized that Bates had carelessly left the magazine of the rifle empty, and he smothered an oath. He had to fight for his life single-handed and unarmed.

With a swift movement he clutched the barrel of the rifle with his left hand, and holding it in front of him with both hands level with his waist, he sprang forward. Two guns had come up at the same time. He could not hope to dodge them both, and his only hope was to upset both men with the same movement. In their haste they had not gotten far apart, and before either of them could fire Brock brought his rifle upward with terrific force.

The butt of the gun caught the shorter man under the chin, while the steel barrel scraped the face of the taller man, peeling off the hide like a knife. Both men were knocked off balance, and they fell back sputtering with mingled pain and rage. It was not the kind of fight they had expected the foe to wage.

Brock realized that his strategy had given him only a momentary advantage. Once the men got apart he could not handle them both, and the man on the floor was still quite capable of using a gun and had to be reckoned with. He raised the gun in the same horizontal position, breast high, and charged them again. Once more the men were unable to get out of the way, or to use their guns. Brock did not hurt them that time, but he sent them sprawling backward toward where Bates sat.

Just in time he saw the wounded man raise his gun, and giving a hasty kick he caught the man's elbow with the side of his foot and knocked the gun aside. The bullet tore into the ceiling, but Brock was yet unscathed.

The odds against him were too great to cope with in the confines of the small room. Suddenly he swung the rifle and hurled it with full force at the two opponents who were on their feet. It struck one of them just below the knees and brought him down.

Brock waited to see no more. The door was right behind him, and he whirled and dashed through it, jerking it shut behind him. A bullet tore through the panels from the inside as he fled. With ungainly but swift leaps he bounded down the pathway to where the three John Doe men had left their horses.

According to Western custom the horses were standing untied, but with dragging reins. The shooting inside had alarmed them and they were shifting about nervously. As Brock came bounding out they began to edge away, but so strong was their training that they did not move fast.

One of them stepped on the bridle reins and was jerked on its haunches by the pain. Before it recovered Brock landed in the saddle with a flying leap. He swooped over and picked up the reins as the horse got under way. Guns were popping behind him, but the only noticeable effect they had was to frighten the two remaining horses and make them hard to catch.

The thing that gave Brock the most comfort was the feel of a rifle beneath his leg. One of the John Doe men had left it in the saddle boot. He did not have to slacken his speed in order to reach down and draw the weapon out. It was an almost new gun, a Savage, but the magazine was full of cartridges. He had no reserve supply, so he was not going to waste any more than he could help.

By this time the two men had caught the other horses, but they appeared to have no stomach for a pursuit after they saw him brandish the rifle. After chasing him for a few hundred yards the men stopped and turned back. Brock pulled his borrowed horse down to an easy lope, but he knew that his respite was only temporary.

And what a mess he had left behind him! A post office shot full of holes, a wounded man, and an open cash drawer. Old Andrew Bates would resume his game of playing sick, and he would surely claim that Brock had forced his way into the office with intent to rob it.

Undoubtedly the three men who had found him there covering Bates with a rifle would corroborate the postmaster's claim. The bullet holes in the building would speak for themselves. If ever there was circumstantial evidence to convict a man of crime, there it was, standing against him.

Strangely enough, it was not the possibility of trouble with the federal government which Brock was thinking about so much as it was the impression Mildred Bates would receive. Her father would be playing 'possum again when she returned, and she could not think otherwise than that Brock had deliberately gone back into the house with intent to rob the place and had failed only because of the arrival of the neighbors. His actions would surely appear to her as the basest sort of betrayal of her confidence.

He was utterly astounded with himself that he cared so much what Mildred would think. Always before he had been even more indifferent to female opinion than he was to public opinion. He told himself now that he cared because Mildred had treated him so kindly, and had been almost the only one in the basin who did not whole-heartedly desire to see him made a corpse. Indeed, there were ample reasons for his gratitude and concern; but there was also growing into his heart another feeling about this girl.

It was preposterous, he told himself. And even if it was true that he was in danger of losing his head over a girl for the first time, what had happened would surely make her his enemy for life. Having thus settled the matter he thought with grim humor of the appearance he must have made that morning.

"Well, romance," he mused with some bitterness, "is one thing I don't have tuh worry about."

Automatically he had been heading back for the old Bennett ranch, but as soon as he had reached the shelter of the willows that grew so densely there, he drew his horse to a stop. His situation had to be considered carefully. The Bennett place was being watched, and it would be but a short time until all the John Does would be told what had happened and would be gathering to that point. There was no sanctuary there, nor anywhere else in Bayhorse Basin.

"I've sure bulldogged a steer called trouble, but I can't neither throw him, nor turn him loose," the cowboy reflected.

If he stayed in the basin or tried to get away, the John Does would get him. Even if he succeeded in escaping from the basin the officers of the law would soon be after him for attempted robbery of the post office.

"I come in here tuh do up this crowd that done for the Bennett boys, an' since there ain't no safety for me away from here I'd just as well stay here till the business is finished—or I am," he said with a shrug.

CHAPTER XIV

A Startling Story

WHEN Mrs. Sam Wallace denied all knowledge of her husband having any medicine that might benefit Andrew Bates, Mildred realized that her parent had sent her away from the ranch just to get rid of her temporarily. That it must have something to do with Brock Morgan, she knew, and

there came a hot, dry feeling into her throat.

She rushed out and climbed upon Bramble, leaving Mrs. Wallace gazing after her in open-mouthed astonishment. She did not try to analyze her concern, but the dominant purpose in her life was to protect this tall, impudent stranger. Had she taken time to think the matter out she would have convinced herself that it was to prevent another lynching, a habit become all too common in Bayhorse Basin, and one in which her father was indirectly implicated.

Her own feelings toward this stranger were not subject to analysis. In her mind she was fully convinced of his criminal activities, but some quality about the man aroused her protective interest. It was not his beauty, for he wasn't really handsome, but when he had looked at her something within her went out in response. She sensed that her anxiety for him was greater than it would have been for another man under the same circumstances. It troubled her, and it made her half ashamed, half angry, and yet she was hurrying frantically back to protect him.

As she neared home she saw a man riding away at a gallop, and another horse standing in front of the house. She knew instinctively that something was wrong, and her heart became leaden. Nevertheless she urged Bramble on at the top of his speed, though her whole body was trembling from weakness.

As she flung herself from her pony and ran up to the door she heard a man groaning loudly inside. "What is it? What's happened?" she gasped.

"That you Mildred?" asked a man's voice. She recognized a neighbor, Matt Sims, by the voice.

"Is—is anybody hurt?" she breathed. It was not her father she was fearing for, either.

"Tom Taylor has got a busted leg, an' yore father seems tuh be in a bad way. He can't speak. I just carried him from the office to his bedroom."

With a sick, bewildered feeling the girl went in. She saw Taylor lying on the floor in the front room, and the groans were coming from him. Sims was kneeling and trying to fashion a tourniquet above the ugly wound.

The girl gave the men a swift glance and hurried into her father's room. He was lying on the bed, and she saw at once that something serious had happened to him. His appearance had changed. His face was badly distorted, as though by severe pain.

Then she saw that the left side of his face had been drawn out of shape until it was lower than the other. The eye drooped, the corner of the mouth held a painful grimace, and that side of the face seemed as stiff and immovable as a board.

She noticed, too, that the left arm and leg lay queerly, and he made no attempt to move them. His eyes rested upon her with an expression which she had never seen in them before. His lips, or the right side of them, moved queerly and he mumbled something that was unintelligible.

The truth was that Andrew Bates had really suffered the stroke which he had been feigning, and he was half paralyzed. His frail body had been unable to withstand the ravages of his colossal temper.

"Tell me what happened," she asked Sims, forcing herself to be calm.

"Your father signaled that he wanted to see somebody, so us and Vasco Latham come right down. We found him in the post office, and that horse thief the boys have been lookin' for had him covered with a rifle an' was robbin' the office. The cash drawer was open just like it is now. Don't know whether he got away with any money or not. You can look," Sims said.

"Never mind the money; go on," said the girl, sick at heart.

"Well, he had the advantage of us because we didn't know what was goin' on till he got the drop on us," Sims went on. "Tom tried tuh draw his

gun an' the outlaw shot him in the leg. It was yore dad's rifle an' there was no shells in the magazine. The stick-up man didn't know that, an' we had a real merry little party, but account o' Tom's hurt we couldn't stop him, but Vasco's gone tuh spread the alarm, an' the outlaw can't git away."

Things were dancing crazily before Mildred's eyes as she stepped forward aimlessly.

"Hey, don't faint," called Sims in alarm.

It aroused the girl. "I won't," she promised. "Can I help you?"

"No. I'll soon have Tom fixed up the best I can," Sims answered. "Then I'll leave you tuh stay with him an' yore father while I go git my wife an' Mrs. Taylor. Then we'll send somebody fer a doctor, an' I'll join the hunt fer that dirty, sneakin' killer. I bet he don't git away another time."

Mildred went into the post office and mechanically inspected the open cash drawer. Nothing was gone. She noted the bullet holes and the general upheaval of the room. She righted things with cold, listless hands, her mind seeming to be in a strange stupor.

"All right, Millie," Sims presently called kindly. "I'll be goin' now. You just keep an eye on things till the women comes. There's nothin' tuh worry about."

"No?" she asked with a flash of bitter sarcasm.

"O' course the shock has made yore dad worse, but he'll pull through," the rancher said cheerfully as he went out.

"If Sims an' Latham had the guts I've got, that lousy crook would never have got away," Tom Taylor informed her after Sims had gone out.

Mildred went into her father's bedroom, more to escape from listening to Taylor than anything else. Presently she became aware that her father was again trying to speak to her, and by listening closely and partly guessing at the meaning, she was able to understand him.

"Jex. Have him come as quick as he can. Got to get things settled," she made out.

"All right. He'll be here," she replied listlessly. Suddenly she glanced at her father sharply. He had been claiming that he was ill and unable to move. Yet according to Sims he had found a means to signal to them, and he had also been in the post office when they arrived.

There could be no other answer to all this except that he had been deceiving her about not being able to move. Yet she realized that there was something seriously wrong with him now. But what loyalty, she asked herself, did she owe to a father who would willfully deceive her?

Such thoughts, however, seemed to be little short of criminal and the girl tried to dismiss them from her mind. He was what he was by reason of a warped mind, and it was her place to stick with him no matter what he did. But she dreaded the arrival of Heber Jex. She knew what her father was going to ask of her, and she wondered where she was going to get the courage to oppose him.

It was only an hour or so until the two neighbor women arrived, and then Bates requested Mildred to come into his room and shut the door.

"First bring my black leather-bound ledger," he requested with his painful, half-articulate voice.

She knew the book to be the one which he always kept on his person, and into which he transferred the final results of his constant figuring, and she was glad to humor his whimsy. She held the book while he turned the pages with the hand that was not paralyzed.

"Thought I was crazy to figure so much didn't you?" he queried.

"No; I only thought it was your way of getting amusement," she denied.

"You thought I was playing that I had a lot of money invested in stocks and bonds, and was keeping account of all the returns, didn't you?" he pursued.

"Yes."

"Well, see these figures here?" he indicated with a weak and trembling finger. "Right there is what that fortune amounts to, and it's in cold cash."

"Yes," she humored him. Looking at the line he was pointing at she saw that the figures were $85,452.00.

He flew into a weak and futile rage. "That's real, I tell you," he tried to shout. "I'm not poor. It's actual money. I've had it carefully invested for years."

"Yes, yes, I know," she soothed.

"When I die it'll all be yours—providing you marry Heber Jex. He's the only man that knows about it. The only man I dare trust you and that much money with. If you don't marry him you'll never get a cent, because money would spoil you like it did your mother. But Heber can handle you."

Mildred's mind was enlightened at last. Many things that had appeared queer before were now clear. Heber Jex had actually taken her father's hallucination about the money seriously, and actually believed in the existence of this mythical fortune. That accounted for the way the man had cultivated her father, and also for his determined effort to marry her. It was so ludicrous that she wanted to laugh.

"Why, I don't want the money," she said. "Give it to Jex if you think so much of him."

At that he stiffened out until she feared that he would have another attack. "I want you taken care of," he mumbled out. He glanced up sharply with his one movable eye, but Mildred did not notice. She scarcely heard him.

"The only way is for you to marry Heber Jex. You've got to do it," he insisted.

"Father, I'll stay and take care of you the best I can, but you mustn't ask that any more, because I'll never do it," she said steadily.

His head lolled over weakly, but Mildred knew that he was gathering his will power to break down her defenses.

Before noon a number of men had stopped at the post office to get details of the shooting affray there that morning, and then hurried on to join in the man-hunt. Mildred was sick at heart, but there was no more that she could do to help Morgan. His act in trying to rob the post office had been deliberate and uncalled for, and he had no reason to expect further help from her even if she were in a position to give it. Yet her mind was with the fugitive, despite her own worries and troubles.

Everything was full of suspense, unsettled. She was aware that she was going to face a crisis in her own life, and it would come with the arrival of Heber Jex. As always she dreaded the coming of the man, and yet as the hours passed and he did not appear she grew more and more restless until she found herself wishing that he would come so that it would be over with.

Somebody had been sent to Red Rock for a doctor for Taylor, and as Mildred saw her father becoming more and more haggard and worn as the hours rolled on she became worried lest he would pass away before the doctor arrived. But she knew that it might be late the next day before the doctor could get there.

And then, just after sunset, Heber Jex arrived. The man strode in with his characteristic overbearing manner, but there were lines of weariness in his face. To Tom Taylor's inquiry he replied brusquely that Morgan had not been found as yet, but that the man could not possibly escape. Then he passed into Bates' room.

"Tough time you've been having, Millie," he said sympathetically, giving her the pet name he occasionally used. Then he bent over Andrew Bates, and the paralytic brightened up immediately and thrust out his one good arm. He was trying to speak, but it was a minute or so before Jex could understand him.

"I'll go out," Mildred said. "If you want me for anything, call."

It was half an hour before Jex

knocked on the door of her room. "Can I speak to you alone, Mildred?" he asked politely.

Since her own room was now the only one in the house that didn't have people in it, she invited the man to come in. She offered Jex the one chair in the room, and when he insisted that she sit down, she sat gingerly upon the edge of the bed.

"The doctor can't get here before tomorrow," Jex said, "but I don't believe he can do any good anyway. I think your father is dying."

She made no comment, but her nerves were taut as steel cords.

"I also sent for a preacher."

"For—for the funeral?" she asked.

"No, to perform a certain little legal ceremony," he said with a trace of a grin. "I knew your father couldn't die happy unless he saw you and me married. That's why I sent for the preacher."

"I see that you believe in the reality of that fortune Father's been telling you about," she said wearily.

He smiled. "You think that's the only reason I want to marry you, but it isn't. I'm crazy about you and always have been. It's the only reason that I haven't told the truth about your father years ago."

"What do you mean by that?" Mildred demanded, a premonition of evil stealing over her.

"I prefer not to say any more," Jex said with his tantalizing smile. "Why not let it go at that and make the old man happy?"

"I'll never marry you," she stated resolutely.

Jex's rather handsome face clouded somberly. "I didn't want to have to use any undue pressure, but it looks like I will," he said. "When that preacher comes we're going to be married."

"That sort of thing went out of style ages ago," she retorted. "You and your John Does belong in the past. You can't intimidate me."

"You don't believe in the existence of that eighty-five thousand dollar fortune then?" he asked.

"I do not. It's merely the delusion of a disordered mind. You ought to know that."

"If I didn't happen to know to the contrary, I would," he said grimly. "Those figures represent actual money—the ill-gotten gains of the old outlaw gang that used to infest this country. The gang of which your father was a member."

Mildred's head was swimming dizzily. It was incredible, preposterous. And yet she had a feeling that it might be true.

"Funny you never guessed it," Jex laughed.

"How did you find it out—if it's true?" the girl flared.

"It was my job to find out," he said calmly. "Look." From an inside pocket the man produced a large, worn piece of paper. "My commission as a detective, authorizing me to make arrests in any part of the state, signed by the man who was governor at that time."

"It's no good now."

"Well, I wouldn't call it exactly worthless. Anyhow, my special job was to watch out for members of the Bunton gang who were expected to return to Bayhorse Basin to recover loot they were supposed to have cached here. Your father was the first and only one to come back, but he was the one I was expecting."

"Why?" the girl asked, with hot, dry lips.

"He'd served time, an' when he got out he married. That fooled us. We dropped a hint to his wife of what he'd been, and she left him. Tried to take the baby, which was you, but your dad stole a march and run off with you. Came back here where he supposed nobody would ever know him. I reckon you was just part of the disguise." The last sentence was sheer cruelty.

"Then why didn't you arrest him instead of waiting all these years?" Mildred demanded painfully.

"At first it was the money. He'd served his time for robbery, and they wanted the money he'd cached. Later it was you."

"It was still the money," she charged coldly.

He chuckled. "The old man was foxy. Instead of digging up the money and leaving the country like we expected, he contrived tuh send it out and invest it somewhere, while he stuck right here. It was a long time before I tumbled, and by that time I'd got my ranch, and had won his confidence. He told me about how much money he was making, and then I knew he'd put one over on me. But he never would tell me where it was."

The girl looked at her tormentor in a half-bewildered way. There were times when he halted in his narrative, and then she believed that he was lying, that he was making up the story out of the whole cloth. But when he went glibly on she believed him.

"The Holdens had come in and they were tough characters. Other men like Gid Whitmore were here, and the Holdens was stealin' 'em to death. I suggested to your father that he organize the John Doe Brotherhood, and he jumped at the chance, because he thought it would show how he hated outlaws. And I guess for a fact that he did.

"Anyway, all I could do was get his friendship, and I did it. I wouldn't cause you any trouble, Millie, but unless you marry me to-morrow I'll have to tell Whitmore and the others how they've been deceived. I've got to have that money, and the only way I can get him to tell where it is, is for you to marry me. He's promised to do that just as soon as that happens, because he likes me and he wants you taken care of. He knows now that he never could get any good out of it himself."

Only a few things stood out in the girl's mind. Her father had not been crazy, and he had been a criminal. She could forgive that, but she couldn't forgive him for organizing the John Doe Brotherhood to war upon men who were better than he was. She got up and started for the door.

"Here, where are you going?" Jex demanded.

"I'm going to ask him if this is true."

Jex grasped her wrist in a grip of iron. "You'll do nothing of the kind, my girl. Do you think I'd let you upset the game I've been playing for all these years? He'd be sore at me, and he'd go to his grave without telling where the money can be found."

"I don't care—I hope he does!"

"So that's the way you feel about it?" Jex gritted. "Well, I reckon I've got still another card to play. You've been in love with that sissy nephew of mine. Well, this foolhardy stranger has arrived here just in time to make it easy for me to convince the brotherhood that Claude is a rustler. If you don't stand up with me to-morrow you'll see Claude with his neck stretched like them Bennetts'."

"You—oh, you—you contemptible wretch! Would you murder the son of your own sister? Why, why Maude Bransom and Claude have both been slaves to you," Mildred gasped.

"Listen, my girl. With that eighty-five thousand dollars I can control Bayhorse Basin. In time I'll be a millionaire. Nothing in God's world can stop me. If you think I'll be balked by a couple of cooing doves like you and Claude, you're mistaken. As for Claude, I hate him anyway—have hated him ever since he begun hanging around you."

There was no pretense about Heber Jex now. All the greed, the malice, the cruelty in his nature stood out nakedly. Looking at him through terror-widened eyes the girl knew he was capable of carrying out his threats. He knew that Andrew Bates was dying, and knew that the old man would stubbornly go to his grave without revealing the secret of his money unless Mildred were married to him. If Bates did weaken at all, it would be to tell

Mildred. Either way, Jex knew that he would not get the money.

"I was to blame. I'd do anything rather than have Claude harmed," the girl sobbed. "I'd even marry you rather than see him a victim of the John Does."

"Well, remember your old man started that John Doe thing," Jex said triumphantly. "I'm going to git some rest now, but I'll be down in the morning. You know where I stand now. One word to your dad or anybody else, and you'll see your sweetheart dancing on air. Better be careful, Mildred."

In dumb, abject misery, Mildred collapsed upon her bed, after Jex had taken his departure. It was all a terrible mess. Her father lay dying, and had it been only on his account she would have defied Jex. But she couldn't see Claude, the boy who had been so faithful and kind to her, murdered. She must keep still, and if it killed her, she must stand up with Heber Jex the next day when the preacher came!

(*To be continued in the next issue.*)

THE LEGEND OF THE LOST HERD

TEXAS tradition has it that away back in 1812 a whole herd of 5,000 longhorns belonging to a man named Boner were stampeded one night in a storm in what is now Brewster County, Texas, and that not one head of the 5,000 was ever found again. The storm was electrical, with a downpour of rain. The boys were unable to curb the stampede that night. By dawn there was a raging blizzard of snow and wind, obliterating tracks. Despite the weather, the punchers "rode circle" to try to pick up the lost cattle. They found not one. Nor was any one of the 5,000 ever seen again.

Now, after all these years, there has occurred what might well be a verification of the old legend. L. D. Bertillion of Mineola, Texas, some time ago, found a huge cave containing many tons of horns and bones of cattle, some well preserved though bleached, others crumbling with age. His find was in the Rio Grande country of the Big Bend toward which Jacob Boner's lost herd was being driven.

The horns found showed the cattle to have been longhorns.

Could these possibly have been Jacob Boner's lost herd, found after all these hundred and some odd years? Certainly no other explanation has been advanced to explain these age-bleached bones in a Rio Grande cavern.

GAMBLERS OF THE OLD WILD WEST

PIONEERS of the early West will agree that the gamblers of the Frontier days were not a bad sort. It is true that they used to win the gold dust the miners had worked hard for and the wages that the cowboys had been allowing to accumulate for months; but the miners and cowboys were willing victims.

The reason for this was that the games of the gamblers furnished recreation in a country where there was little enough amusement, and the gamblers were really a charitable lot. Many a widow whose husband was killed in a mine accident or who died in some of the early epidemics of the West was befriended by the gambling element. Their names were usually first on any charitable list and their donations were among the largest.

The gamblers were never violent outside *their own circle. They* would have fights among themselves and would kill each other, but such trouble, practically without exception, was confined to their own ranks.

When such killings occurred, the law-abiding element seldom interfered. The gamblers could be counted on to take care of their own feuds and troubles without ringing in any outsiders.

The early Western gamblers should never be confused with the road agents, stage bandits, cattle rustlers or desperadoes. They were another element entirely. They always respected property rights, and if they could not win a man's money in a game of chance, they let him severely alone. Socially they kept very much to themselves. They married among their own clan. Their children were well provided for, attended the public schools, and their home life quite often was exemplary.

In the early days gambling was a recognized profession and the big gamblers were members of the early Chambers of Commerce and law and order organizations. Much money was invested in gambling establishments, and some of these places were ornate in equipment and furnishings.

The Jinx On the Bar 7

By Monty Castle

When a gal plays foreman on a Western spread yuh can look for strange things tuh happen—Love? Yeah, folks—the real thing, that makes the stars sing and the rangeland sunshine even brighter than ever.

TWO letters left Yucca Flats in the same mail bag. Two letters rubbed flaps together all the way to Denver. Two letters were delivered at the same hour to the same person at the same address. But the contents of those letters were strikingly dissimilar in every conceivable respect.

The first, written on a sheet of glossy bond, the entire top third of which was devoted to a highly imaginative representation of the Stockmen's Bank of the town of Yucca Flats.

It read as follows:

Mr. Robert Dennison,
Denver, Colorado.

Dear Sir:

We understand that you have been forced to take over that worthless bunch of gopher holes called the Bar 7 Ranch. You are likely only too well aware that the land won't even raise right healthy gophers, so you'll be relieved to know I got an offer on the place for you. The Ox-Yoke outfit, rather than be pestered with fences cutting across their range, are generously offering $1 an acre for your place. That's more than it's worth, but they don't split hairs. The Bar 7 has always been a failure. Hoping you are the same, I remain,

Zebulon Juckett,
Pres. Stockmen's Bank.

The second letter was written on plain white paper. It read:

My dear Mr. Dennison:

Since the Bar 7 now belongs to you instead of to my father, I should like to ask whether you have made any arrangements for continuing to ranch it. If not, may I apply for the job of foreman? I am twenty years old, husky, and have been running cattle with my dad ever since I was a kid. If he hadn't got bunged up when his horse threw him, I don't think we'd ever have lost the place.

The Bar 7 is a grand ranch, Mr. Dennison. It's got the finest water hole, the best natural range, in fact everything but luck! One jinx after another seems to have hounded the Bar 7. If you'll only give me a chance, I'll try to kill that jinx.

Respectfully yours,

Larry Moore.

LARRY MOORE climbed into the big bus that stopped in Yucca Flats each morning and afternoon. Settling herself just behind the empty driver's seat, she opened her bag and proceeded to powder her small and inquisitive nose with great thoroughness. Then she yanked her tight little green felt down farther, until her right eye was completely instead of only partially eclipsed, tweaked a brown curl out over a red cheek and grinned impudently into her mirror.

"Behold!" she chuckled to herself, "the hard-boiled, hard-fisted, hard-ridin' new foreman of the Bar 7!" Importantly, she patted the reply to her application for a job which had come in that very afternoon's mail.

Now she didn't dread going back home quite so terribly. Now she wouldn't have to lie—well, not so much anyhow—to her poor old dad lying there helpless with his paralyzed legs. Now she could go on with her pretense that he was still the actual owner of the Bar 7, that crops were good and prices high.

All through the past year, while their stock had thinned and their notes at the bank had increased, she had played her desperate little game with him. Until, only last week, she thought she'd reached the end. The ranch itself was no longer theirs, and the new owner, a Mr. Robert Dennison, lived clear off in Denver. They'd have to get off the place; her father would find out that they'd lost the Bar 7; and the shock would probably kill him.

In a last mad burst of courage she had written that letter to the new owner. And, as a result, she was the foreman of the Bar 7!

She glanced about her at the empty bus. Here was one more thing to be thankful for—this big cross-country bus that came within a mile of the Bar 7. She could always explain cheerfully to her father that she'd a lot rather watch for the bus than to crank up "Stuttering Stella," their stubborn flivver. Poor old "Stuttering Stella" that had been sold two months before!

Larry wondered what was keeping the new driver. She wouldn't admit even to herself that one reason she'd hurried to get on early this afternoon was because she was wildly curious about this same new driver whom she had seen for the first time on her way to town that morning. But the bus had been full then, and she doubted whether he'd even noticed her.

At that moment a tall young man in a khaki uniform sauntered out of the corner drug store. As he glanced up and saw his single passenger, he increased his saunter to a lope. With a powerful swing, he lifted himself up into the bus and slid his long legs in behind the wheel. Then he turned to grin disarmingly over his shoulder at Larry. She noticed promptly that he had nice little laughing wrinkles at the corners of his blue eyes, and flocks of freckles, not to mention a mouth with a tendency to quirk upwards.

"The company warned me there'd be a valuable shipment from Yucca Flats on this trip out. Well—now that you're on, shall we start?" he inquired gravely.

For a girl who was practically engaged to be married to the town's leading citizen, Larry's color mounted most unreasonably. Suddenly the ride home seemed to have taken on all sorts of

new and entertaining possibilities.

"I guess you're pretty new, aren't you?" she asked demurely.

"You'd be surprised how old I am. It's just that I'm well preserved, ma'am!"

"I mean you're new on this bus line," said Larry haughtily. She ought to snub this fresh creature, but her curiosity got the better of her. "Aren't you?" she demanded.

"I do seem to be, don't I?"

"The other driver's name was Jones. Sam Jones," she remarked insinuatingly.

"That so? Well, mine's Brown. Tom Brown."

"Oh."

There was silence.

"Do you spell it with a 'q' or a 'z'?" he inquired innocently after a pause.

"Spell what?"

"Your last name. I didn't quite get it just now."

This time Larry's pretty lips did curve into a guilty grin.

"You win! I admit I was just plain curious, Mr. Brown. My name's Moore. Larry Moore."

"Larry? Short for Laura, perhaps?" inquired the other evenly.

"Laura nothing!" exclaimed the girl disgustedly. "It's short for Laramie. Can you beat that? Laramie!"

"But why—?"

"Because my parents were just plain demented, that's why! They were coming out West to homestead and they got as far as Laramie, Wyoming, when I was born. I suppose I ought to be thankful, though, because if it had been two days sooner, my name would have been 'Polecat Gulch,' and a week later, and I'd have been 'Miss Big-Mouth Creek'! So I guess Larry isn't so bad. Useful even!" She smiled secretly. "Imagine getting this new job with a name like Gwendolyn!"

"Oh, well, names aren't so important," said the young man consolingly. "It's what's back of them." He glanced at his watch. "Time to be moving. By the way, speaking of names, who is this Zebulon Juckett that's carrying these here valuables to Pringle to-day?"

All the sparkle died out of the girl's face at his words.

"Zeb Juckett? Is he going to Pringle to-day? Why—er, Zeb's one of the—the Jucketts."

"So I gathered," with faint sarcasm. "Old man Juckett's son, perhaps?"

"Well, the Jucketts are pretty important around here," she said stiffly. "Zeb's likely carrying a lot of money over to their correspondent bank in Pringle. You see, Zeb owns the bank and Malachi owns the Ox-Yoke Ranch. This whole valley and everybody in it, you might say, belongs to either the bank or the Ox-Yoke."

"Everybody?"

Larry's brown eyes avoided his intent scrutiny. Her lovely color flooded across her cheeks.

Just then several passengers crowded into the bus. The last of them was a lean, weathered man of about forty. A man with small, careful black eyes and a thin-lipped, careful mouth. He carried an old-fashioned satchel in his hand.

"Howdy, Laramie. I was hopin' you'd be on this bus. I got important business in Pringle to-day." He patted the satchel meaningly. "Savin' this seat for me?"

Larry smiled faintly and moved over.

Zebulon Juckett sat down and threw a proprietary arm across the back of Larry's seat. Miserably, the girl stared at the broad shoulders of the bus driver. The young man's ears seemed to be very pink and his attention to center most intently upon the mechanism of his car.

The engine began to roar, and the bus rumbled down the main street of Yucca Flats and out into the open country, the fair open country that was mostly owned by either Malachi or Zebulon Juckett.

"It'll be dark by the time we've gone the ten miles to that crossroad where you get off," remarked Zeb disap-

provingly. "Thank goodness you can't keep up this here nonsense of foolin' your dad much longer, now that you don't even own the place, Laramie. 'Course I'm sorry you lost it, but something had to bring you to your senses. If losin' the Bar 7 will send you to me any sooner, you can't blame me for not bustin' out cryin', can you, little girl?"

He tightened his thin arm about her shoulders and leaned closer. In an agony of embarrassment Larry shrank back into the corner of her seat. *Was* that very ruddy left ear in the seat ahead cocked in her direction?

"But, Zeb, things aren't as bad as you think. I've just had a letter from the new owner—" she was beginning, but her words were lost in the sharp roar of the engine as the bus gathered speed for the steep grade on what was known as the Hogback Road, a section that wound about sharp curves and through eroded gullies.

"How's that?" shouted Zeb.

"Oh, nothing. I was only going to say I'd try to hold on for Dad's sake as long as possible," Larry shouted back. Somehow, she couldn't tell him about her new job, or how pleased she was over getting it, because Zeb had been so kind about extending their notes and giving advice. He had been so kind to her father—always including him in their plans, and building that extra room onto the new house, when what Zeb really wanted was a cupola.

"Well, it's all foolishness, Laramie! What say, I get the ring while I'm over to Pringle? Look at all that currency I'm takin' to the Commercial Bank." He picked up the little satchel and opened it impressively. Larry glimpsed thick packages of bills banded together. "Think I couldn't get you the swellest sparkler in the county, eh?"

He set the bag down on the floor and squeezed closer. Larry could feel the bony pressure of his fingers on her arm. She couldn't look at him, but glued her eyes to the road, instead. It was with a gasp of relief that she was able to distract his attention from herself.

"Look, what's that?"

The bus was slowing down for something. In the funnel of light that bored through the darkness a great cottonwood trunk lay squarely across the middle of their course. At this point the road swerved around a jutting promontory of rock, and the upper end of the log was hidden by the bend.

Zeb glanced up sharply.

"Wind knocked over another cottonwood, eh?"

Already Tom Brown was climbing out. Fascinated, Larry watched him tug at the big trunk. He was trying to push it over the left bank where it would roll to the bottom of the gully. But all his straining was useless. Evidently the upper end of the log was held fast in the rocks beyond the bend. Tom Brown trudged out of sight. The log rotated an inch or two in either direction and then was still.

"Maybe you better help him, Zeb," she suggested timidly. Zebulon Juckett was not the sort to whom it was easy to offer advice.

"Guess I better," he agreed at once. "First I'll shut the engine off." He reached over and fumbled at the dash, but instead of stopping the engine, he put out the lights. The bus was plunged into darkness, intensifying the growing feeling of apprehension in Larry's mind. Zeb grumbled as he crawled over into the driver's seat to right his mistake. He found the button, but even when the lights flashed on again they could not dispel the uneasiness that was spreading among the passengers.

Larry stared at the back of Zeb's head, while he tinkered with the mechanism. Why didn't he *do* something? Funny that she'd never noticed before how sort of thin the hair on the back of his head was, and how wrinkled and leathery his neck looked. She shivered. Not, of course, that the back of a man's neck had a thing to

do with the qualities that make for a good husband.

Her glance returned to the road. It was still empty; the log was still there. The headlights painted the outjutting angle of rock with a bald, flat light, and threw the rest of the world into darkness. She wanted suddenly to scream. She wanted to push Zeb's lean, deliberate frame out of the bus and along up the road. Where *was* Tom Brown?

A fat man in the rear waddled up the car aisle.

"Guess I'll go see what's become of our driver," he announced.

Zeb followed him. Larry watched them approach the cottonwood trunk, saw them test it experimentally before they climbed over it and disappeared around a bend. Presently they returned to the log, which they apparently pushed with ease to the side of the road. Dusting off their hands, they trudged back to the bus.

"He wasn't nowhere in sight," grumbled the fat man in a puzzled voice. "Queer, too—a baby coulda moved that log."

Unconsciously the girl's eyes wandered to the floor.

"Zeb!" she gasped, her eyes staring. "Zeb! Your bag!"

"My money!" shouted Zeb. "He stole my money and skipped!"

The bus was in an uproar. Women grew hysterical; the fat man looked apoplectic; Zeb waved his arms like a maniac.

"He's got a gang around here somewheres," he babbled. "They musta fixed that log!"

"Quick! Let's get going. I don't like this place!" shrilled the fat man.

"We'll hit for the sheriff in Pringle," said Zeb.

Only Larry sat frozen in her seat. So it was all a frame-up! That nice young man with the blue eyes and the humorous mouth had only been waiting for this chance to pull off a robbery. It was a slick idea—that log in this lonely spot; his pals waiting with a horse at the edge of the mesa. "Brown" he'd said his name was. "Tom Brown!" Well, anybody could see that was a fake on the face of it. She felt queer and sick inside.

Zeb Juckett, with advice from the fat man, experimented until he managed to start the bus. It rumbled cautiously along the winding road until they were out on the level prairie again. The passengers calmed down under the reassuring hum of the big motor.

"Sure you ain't scared?" inquired Zeb when they reached Larry's crossroad. "If I didn't have to get to Pringle—gotta block every road out of the state!"

"No, I'm not a bit afraid, Zeb. I'll just scoot up the road."

And scoot she did. But in spite of her speed, her father was ashen-faced with worry. She glanced at the tray she had left for him. It was untouched.

"Just a little bus trouble along the way, Dad. They fixed it, though. I began to think our old 'Stuttering Stella' wasn't such a bad little flivver after all!"

Oh, dear, she'd put her foot in it that time! Now he'd start questioning her about their flivver again. She was so tired of lying.

"Well, I sold those two-year-olds," she went on hastily as she slipped into a gingham apron and began stuffing pine-cones into the kitchen stove to start a blaze. "Got two cents a pound more than we figured on, too. Isn't that grand?"

"You're a great little old trader, Larry. How I wish your mother could have lived to see you now. She used to say, 'We're so lucky to have got this far west, Ben, and so lucky to have this beautiful baby. Let's call her Laramie!' It was a lucky name, all right, wasn't it, honey?"

And Larry, thinking of the letter in her handbag, addressed to "Mr. Larry Moore" agreed that it was, indeed, a lucky name.

"When you going to fix up a bed for

me in the kitchen so I can see out the window?" he inquired after a pause.

Larry's fingers tightened on the handle of the tea kettle. How could she stall him off much longer? That would be the end. One look at the corrals would tell him there hadn't been any two-year-olds to sell to-day. That "Stuttering Stella's" shed had long been vacant. That the only stock left on the place were a few scrubs and a milk cow and a couple of saddle horses.

Then, after all that, her poor father would have to learn about their new pedigreed bull being shot for the hoof-and-mouth. It was Malachi Juckett who had discovered the fact, and—good neighbor that he was—he'd shot and buried the animal even before Larry could get there, so as not to infect the rest of the herd. Not that it made much difference, though, on account of the coyote poison that got dragged into their water hole, killing their best whitefaces.

Somehow it had seemed like the last straw, yesterday, when she had found their wiry little cow-dog, Shep, stretched out stiff and cold beside this same poisoned water hole.

"We'll see, Dad, as soon as you're stronger." The doctor had warned her gravely to avoid any sudden shocks. "Now which shall it be, eggs *à la* Ritz Carlton, scrambled, or *de la crème* or poached?" Larry's voice was gay, but her throat ached dully.

Presently they were companionably eating eggs *à la* Ritz Carlton, while Larry perched on the foot of her dad's bed and gave funny little accounts of the day's happenings. She didn't mention the robbery. She knew he wouldn't sleep a wink for thinking about her lonely mile-long walk from the bus, through the blackness.

After a little, comforted as he always was by her presence, he fell asleep. For a moment Larry stood looking down at his dear, worn face, and at his great frame, gaunt with suffering. She resolved fiercely to find a way to play their little game, if it killed her.

But later, lying huddled under her faded quilts and staring through the window at the distant range that glimmered coldly in the moonlight, the day's happenings seemed to rise up to mock her.

To think that the first man whose smile had ever haunted her, and whose eyes had made her breath quicken and her heart pound, was nothing but a common thief! She hated him, and herself, and life in general. She hoped they caught him. Certainly she did, and sent him to the pen for a good long term. Then, unaccountably, she turned her face to the wall and sobbed till she fell asleep.

After breakfast the next morning she hitched a horse to a light wagon, and loaded in a post hole digger and a wire-stretcher. She had driven out well beyond the corral when she stopped the horse and ran back to the house. From the drawer in the cupboard she took a small and well cleaned automatic, slipped it into the pocket of her leather jacket, and returned to the wagon.

It was all nonsense, of course, this taking a gun along. Tom Brown and his gang would be far, far away by now. Still—

She recalled, as she straightened sagging barbed wires, how this Tom Brown seemed to have listened to her conversation with Zeb the night before on the bus. She recalled, too, how he had questioned her earlier about Zeb, and about herself and where she lived. And she, like a little fool, had told him everything, and blushed and gotten all hot and excited because of the way he'd smiled at her!

Not until she was back in the wagon again did she admit to herself that she was going to look over the scene of last night's robbery. The wagon rattled across another mile or two of open range, passed through a wire gate, and drew up at last near the very spot.

As she climbed warily down, the silence of the prairie oppressed her. A ground squirrel flirted on top of a

rock, sitting back on his haunches to look at her. She moved closer; the creature vanished. It was all so still.

Larry sucked in her breath sharply when she saw the trampled space where horses had stood. So it was true! He *had* gone off with his gang.

She made her way down the steep bank and inspected the log which still lay where Zeb had pushed it. Tatters of rope remained about one end of it, by which it had doubtless been dragged down the slope. The bushes all about were flattened in a wide swathe.

Then she saw the blood! Dark splotches on a big rock. Her heart pounded unendurably. She clambered up the bank, her keen eyes picking out other tell-tale splotches. What could they mean? She circled about, peering at the sandy soil. Here a bush was broken, there a rock upturned. Were there tracks leading down into that arroyo? She made herself follow them—down the slope and along the bottom of the gully.

Presently she found him! A huddled heap that had been a man. Blood-stained khaki that had been a bus-driver's uniform.

Frantically she knelt beside him. His face was almost unrecognizable, it was so bruised. A crushing blow had left hair and blood matted over one tempie. She felt for his pulse. No—yes, faint, but definite. As she glanced up anxiously, her eyes lighted on the fateful little black bag. It gaped accusingly open—empty. She felt suddenly dizzy. It could mean only one thing; his gang had double-crossed him and skipped with the money.

With a grim little shrug she returned to her task. She couldn't leave him here to die. The logical thing to do was to go over to the Ox-Yoke and get Malachi. The logical thing, perhaps; but suddenly Larry knew she wasn't going to do the logical thing. Instead, she raced back up the hill to the wagon, which she drove by a roundabout way to the bottom of the gully. With infinite patience and skill she backed until the rear of the wagon was just below the slope where Tom Brown lay huddled. Could she move him?

She found some lengths of cottonwood with which she built a sort of a runway between the bank and the wagon floor. Then she slipped her arms under the man's shoulders and tried to lift him. He was terribly heavy; she tugged and strained. He opened his eyes and stared at her unseeingly.

Larry implored him to help, and he seemed to try. After an age she got him into the wagon. She looked back and saw the black bag. Better not leave it down here where they'd find her wagon tracks. Gingerly she picked it up.

Yes, it was completely empty. A little thong of braided black-and-white horsehair was caught in the handle of the bag. She untangled it absently and thrust it into the pocket of her leather jacket. Then she placed the bag on the hill where the horses had stood.

Hurriedly she returned to her wagon and drove it cautiously out through the draw. If he could only stand the trip back. Back where? She mustn't be a fool. The logical thing to do was to take him straight over to the Ox-Yoke and send for the sheriff. But again she knew that she wasn't going to do the logical thing. Instead she was going to take him to the Bar 7. There would be plenty of time to send for the sheriff later.

As she topped the rise and saw that there was no one in sight she gave a quivering sigh of relief. Not a sound issued from that still shape in the wagon behind her. This terrible jolting! Presently she reached the barbed wire gate on the Bar 7, and, as she closed it behind her, she drew a deep breath. Safe!

She stopped long enough to feel the man's pulse. His heart was still beating. But he looked bad, terribly bad, she thought as she piled more straw under his head. She straightened up to reach for the reins and saw a flock of black specks swarming down over

Lizard Butte. The posse! One of them was heading toward her, and she was sure that it was Malachi Juckett.

What ought she to do? Turn Tom Brown over to the police at once? Any girl in her right mind would do that. Yes, of course—that's what she'd do.

But all the while that she was arguing with herself, she was moving with frantic haste. She draped an old quilt that had been folded on the wagon seat over the wounded man, piled straw on top of that, and stocked rolls of wire up at one side so they would show. When Malachi Juckett rode up she was noisily banging wire staples into a post.

"You shouldn't be 'way down here all by yourself, after what happened last night, little girl," Juckett said with heavy gallantry. "A cute little trick like you. What you need is somebody to take care of you!" He swelled out his chest and leaned closer.

Larry gave him a startled glance. She was glad that the fence was between them. How like Zeb he was, she thought fleetingly. She wondered if *his* neck was leathery in back under his sparse hair.

"Have they found out anything?" she inquired as calmly as she could.

"Nope, not yet. Blocked every road out of the state, and we got up a posse this mornin' from the Ox-Yoke. Seems they been other hold-ups already on this bus line. And one killing. They pinned it on this bozo for sure. 'Course, as a gen'ral thing, I'm agin trial by Judge Lynch," he assured her virtuously, "but, as Zeb says to me this mornin', they's some outlaws as don't deserve all the expense of a trial by jury!"

Tell him now, tell him now, Larry urged herself wildly. She would, this very instant. And then she heard the echo of a groan from the wagon box. With a wail of pain she dropped her hammer and clutched at her thumb.

"Ow—ow!" she danced up and down in pretended pain. "I never *could* drive a nail without trying to pound my thumb into the post too!" She backed toward the wagon; if he moaned again Malachi might think it was she.

Malachi smiled indulgently. He liked his women a bit helpless.

Larry leaned back against the wagon box and steadied herself with her hand. If Malachi didn't move on pretty soon she thought she'd go stark crazy. Her outstretched hand that rested on the bottom of the wagon box felt suddenly wet. She turned her eyes toward it fearfully. Her fingers were drenched with blood. From the bottom there was a slow, red drip—drip—drip, that ended in a crimson puddle on the ground. She grew oddly giddy.

Jerking out her handkerchief, she wrapped it hastily about her bloody hand. Would he notice that it was the *other* one she had pretended was injured?

Like a mother pheasant who trails a make-believe broken wing directly in front of the hunters in order to give her chicks time to hide, Larry jumped toward the fence, chattering volubly while she gathered up her tools.

"Guess that about finishes my fence fixing for to-day," she babbled, waving her bandaged hand. "Poor Zeb, I'll bet he's furious about losing all that money. But I wouldn't be surprised if *you* were the one who finally caught the bandit, Malachi!" she remarked admiringly, bringing him back to the present with a start.

With a reluctant "so long" he departed. When at last he was out of sight, Larry mopped her forehead. Whew, what a narrow escape! She clucked to her horse, and they started cautiously over the hill.

Her brain was in a turmoil. What on earth should she do with the bandit, now that she'd saved him from the posse? She couldn't take him to the ranch house. There were no tenant quarters on the place. The empty bunkhouse? Too near the road. The old dugout—that was it!

Ahead of her in the side of the hill

she saw the swelling mound that had been the first dwelling on the Bar 7. It was tight and warm; its two small windows were unbroken. There was a spring close by. Larry remembered the rusty sheet-iron stove, the old bunk which had a rope bottom. She headed for the place.

Tom Brown was weak but semi-conscious when she stopped the wagon. Utilizing his brief moments of clarity, she managed to get him into the dug-out. With straw and the old quilt she made a sort of a bed. Then she built a fire and put water on to heat. She'd risk the smoke this once.

She drove hurriedly to the house for medicine and hot milk. In an hour she was back, this time to make a careful examination of the man's wounds. Nothing broken, thank God! Unless it might be that his skull was fractured. That was a terrific blow he'd received on the head. A bullet had punctured his shoulder, but it had gone clean through. In addition he was bruised from head to foot.

Angry tears streamed down Larry's cheeks as she bathed and disinfected his wounds. Then she bandaged them carefully, managed to get some hot milk between his clenched teeth, and covered him up warmly. Sleep was about the only medicine that could help him now, plus the natural vigor of his powerful young body.

"My, you was in a hurry that last time, Larry," chuckled her father when she returned. "What were you fussing around the medicine chest for?"

Larry became suddenly very busy with the covers at the foot of his bed. When she spoke, her voice was even.

"Oh, I just wanted some iodine and stuff. You see—er—that is, well, I found old Shep all sort of bunged up. Scratched and bitten, like maybe he'd gotten into a fracas with a prairie wolf!"

A wave of relief swept over her. That was pretty good lying, right off-hand. Then her throat ached. Poor old Shep! When she'd told Zeb about it last night, all he'd done was to tell her he'd buy her another dog just as good!

Her father was deeply concerned. So she'd put him in the old dugout, had she? And Shep seemed to be doing well? A tooth-wound was apt to become infected. She must go down and see him twice a day, at least. Larry added convincing details about Shep's condition.

The neighborhood was considerably wrought up over the robbery of Zeb Juckett. Perhaps the flame of animosity was fanned by the fact that the neighborhood had found it advisable to be wrought up over whatever concerned the Jucketts.

Few callers came to the Bar 7. There was kind old Dr. Wheatley who drove out regularly from Yucca Flats to see Larry's father, and who, alone in the valley, seemed to live above and outside the affairs of the Jucketts. There was Malachi Juckett, who managed to drop by with increasing and somewhat alarming frequency. He always had some plausible errand connected with ranch business to talk over with Larry, but the girl grew to hate the air of conspiracy with which he implied that it would be just as well if neither of them were to mention his visits to Zeb.

And, of course, there was Zeb—who sat in the parlor two evenings each week. Zeb who tried awkwardly to put his arm about her whenever she forgot and made the mistake of sitting down on the leatherette sofa. Zeb who could afford to sit back and wait in his very comfortable web for a certain worried and almost distracted little fly whose frantic efforts were only entangling it tighter and tighter in that same web.

Larry thought she noticed a change in Zeb's manner when he called on her the next night after the robbery. His calm air of waiting had shifted to one of impatience. Larry could no longer elude the bony arm that slipped about her, or the man's insistent demands

that now she must name the day. If she hadn't remembered how kind he was, she might almost have thought there was a threat in his voice. Her chin tilted stubbornly.

"No, Zeb, I just can't set the date yet. As long as—while Father—"

"But don't you see, Laramie, this can't go on? You two are only a couple of penniless squatters, you might say, living along here on somebody else's property!"

That was too much for Larry. Her eyes flashed.

"Why, Zeb Juckett, how dare you! If you want to know the truth, I'm the new foreman of the Bar 7. I have a letter from the owner saying so!"

Zeb looked for a moment as though some one had given him a knockout blow. Then his leathery face slowly reddened.

"Is that so? Well, how long did he say your job would last?" he inquired shrewdly.

"Till—till further notice!" confessed Larry doubtfully.

"I thought as much. 'Cause the bank's had a letter from him saying to sell the Bar 7 to the Ox-Yoke, at any price!"

It was Larry's turn to look as though she had received the knockout blow. She might have known this was what would happen. Her precious job! The end of the make-believe with her father! She winked very fast, and at the sight Zeb softened.

"There, there, little girl. You do need somebody to take care of you, don't you? I was meanin' to ask you this evenin' if we shouldn't have the radio put in the sittin' room of our house."

Larry remained unhappily silent.

"—So your father could hear it from his bedroom," amended Zeb craftily.

"That's good of you, Zeb."

After all, they couldn't go on living here if she wasn't to be the foreman. Her father simply had to have care and attention and comfort.

Zeb knew when to let well enough alone. In a few minutes he took his departure, after promising her to delay the sale of the Bar 7 until she could get her wedding things together. After he was gone she realized that she hadn't told him about the wounded bus driver. But she would the next time. Certainly she would!

Larry's dreams that night were a queer mixture of playing angel of mercy at the bedside of a handsome patient in a khaki bus driver's uniform, and of little Red Riding Hood running away from a very hungry wolf with beady black eyes and a leathery neck. The faster she ran the closer came the wolf.

The next day and the next showed no improvement in her patient. He tossed feverishly, muttering unintelligible bits, while two red spots scorched his cheekbones.

But on the fourth day, as she entered the dugout and bent down anxiously over him, he opened his eyes and grinned feebly.

"Why, say—you're real!" he whispered.

Larry's heart leaped.

"Very!" she said cheerfully. "A hundred and fifteen pounds of me!"

"But I thought you were a dream. I been seeing nothing but a pair of the prettiest brown eyes and—the sweetest mouth in the world, so I thought sure I must be delirious. Now—"

"Well, you certainly *were* delirious if you saw all that," said Larry demurely. "Now that your head's clear, you can plainly see you've been looking at the weather-beaten old foreman of the Bar 7. The past foreman, I mean," she added forlornly.

"Past?"

"Yes, I *was* the foreman. But Mr. Zebulon Juckett—at the bank, you know—has had word from the owner to sell to the Ox-Yoke. So Dad and I are really only squatters here, you might say. Zeb says he can put off selling it for maybe a month. Then we'll be going into town to live. Zeb has been so kind."

At the name "Juckett" the young man's eyes narrowed.

"Sure, I'll bet he's kind. Just like wasps and rattlesnakes and mad dogs!"

Larry stiffened. This Tom Brown certainly had his nerve.

"Don't you think you're pretty small —running down the man you robbed?" she asked sarcastically.

"Oh, so I robbed him, did I?"

Larry glared at him witheringly. It wasn't so easy to be properly scathing to a young man while he leaned against your shoulder, and you fed him his soup from a bowl.

"It's no excuse to say you only robbed the bank instead of Zeb. Stealing is stealing!"

"Oh, yeah?"

Why, he was being downright insolent! Furious tears smarted in her eyes. When Larry was dreadfully angry, tears always rose to her eyes, and that only made her the angrier.

"Yes," she said tremblingly, "I ought to turn you over to the law this minute. What will people say when they know I've harbored a criminal for four days? Wasn't I right on the bus when you got down to move that log? And when Zeb went to look for you, hadn't you disappeared completely? Didn't I myself discovered that his bag was stolen?"

"I dunno," remarked the young man coolly. "Did you?"

"I certainly did. Then the next morning, when my fool curiosity drove me down to look at the place where it had happened, didn't I run onto you and the empty bag and the tracks of your gang? If they hadn't double-crossed you and skipped with the loot, I suppose you'd still be living free and easy on your stolen money, instead of being left for dead. So I found you and carted you over to this dugout, with the posse on my heels!"

"You did all that for me? For me?" Larry flushed.

"Certainly not! It's only that I either like to cure or else shoot a sick animal when I find it!"

Tom Brown stared up at her feverishly. She hadn't noticed how the red had crept back to his cheekbones again, and how his hand shook.

"Thank you, Miss Moore. I owe you a very great debt. But really I can't impose on your kindness any longer. I'll just be moving along—"

He raised himself in the bunk, put one foot out on the floor and stood up.

"Oh, no, you mustn't!"

But she was too late. Tom Brown teetered uncertainly back and forth on his stockinged feet, and slumped backwards into the bunk, unconscious.

She'd killed him! She knew he must be dead. It was all her fault. In an agony of apprehension she rushed to him.

But he wasn't dead. Kneeling beside him, her arm under his head, Larry begged him to come back to her. Sobbed that she'd been a fool; that she hadn't meant a word of it; that she couldn't bear it if he died.

After an eternity the shadowy eyelids lifted, the blue eyes stared up into hers, and the ashen lips moved slowly.

"I—I'd come straight back from hell, if you asked me to!" he whispered faintly. Presently he fell asleep.

Thrilled, shaken, hating herself and trying to hate this man who stirred her so, Larry slipped away from him and out to the cottonwoods where she had left her horse.

It was harder after that. Harder to cope with Zeb's ever surer love making. Harder to meet those blue eyes and that crinkling smile of the man who was a thief. Harder to find excuses to give her father about Shep's slow recovery. He kept asking about the dog, and Larry's inventiveness had almost reached the breaking point. To-morrow, she thought firmly, to-morrow Tom Brown will be well enough to take to town and hand over to the sheriff.

But somehow she didn't sleep very well that night, and a pair of reproachful blue eyes stared out at her from a white face, and she couldn't seem to

forget the weight of a man's head in her arms. A thief's eyes! A thief's head!

Tom Brown was a lively patient the next morning. He had walked a few steps the night before, and he was feeling fit, he told her. If she could manage to get him to the railroad that evening—

Larry was noncommittal. How could she tell him she didn't intend to do anything of the sort? That she couldn't very well marry Zeb Juckett, who was going to do so much for her father, and then help the man who had robbed him to make his escape.

So she made excuses and hurried back to the ranch.

As her horse topped a rise she saw Zeb Juckett's car bounding over the unused wagon trail that led from the barns of the Bar 7 back across the range and toward the Ox-Yoke. Only a man who was in an insane hurry would risk his neck on such a road.

"Zeb's just been here," said her father in a puzzled voice as she entered the house. "Left kinda hasty, too, I thought."

"Why?" Larry's voice seemed to stick in her throat.

"Can't figure out. I was tellin' him about how you'd been tendin' old Shep in the dugout, and about all the bandages and iodine and soup you been carryin' down, and he asks, 'When did the dog get hurt?' and I says, 'Just a week ago to-day!' "

Larry covered her mouth to keep from screaming. She'd already told Zeb that Shep was dead. The bus robbery had been a week ago. He'd put two and two together, and was rushing hell-bent over to the Ox-Yoke to get hold of somebody to help him capture Tom Brown.

"What did he say then?" she gasped.

"He says the only cure for that kind of a dog is a real tight neck-bandage. Seems like that's a queer remedy."

Larry didn't even hear the last words of what her father was saying. Before he had finished, she was out the door and running toward her horse. She left every gate open behind her in her race with despair.

From the top of the last hill she could look down toward the dugout. Two horses were tied outside!

Sobbing, she jumped to the ground and ran to push open the door. The scene she had been dreading met her eyes. Tom Brown, lying gagged and bound on the bunk; Zebulon Juckett, leering down at him with a menacing gun; Malachi, rigging up a hangman's noose over the rafters—the "tight neck-bandage."

Zeb looked up and scowled at her furiously.

"You get out of here! You made enough fool of yourself nursin' this here thief. Now he's going to hang for the robbery and for them murders over beyond Pringle, too!"

"You shan't! It's against the law. I won't let you!"

Her hands, clenched deep in the pockets of her leather jacket, jammed against the cold hardness of the little automatic which she had thrust there a week ago. Like a flash, she jerked it out and aimed at the two men. Zeb and Malachi stared first at her and then down at her small gun. Their faces underwent the most extraordinary changes.

To Larry's amazement, the two men crouched and circled each other like snarling wildcats. Her astonished gaze returned to the gun that seemed to have started this fracas. There, caught in the trigger, was the braided horsehair thong that she had untangled from the handle of the satchel a week ago.

"You skunk! Sayin' you didn't know where you lost your horsehair fob, when you had went and gave it to my girl!" Zeb raged at his brother. "You're a dirty double-crosser. Didn't you promise you'd keep your hands off her if I helped you git hold of the Bar 7?" he shrilled, insane with jealousy. "And didn't you swear you'd killed this guy too?"

"I never give that watch-fob to her!" Malachi roared back. "I lost it, I tell you, I lost it! You're the double-crosser! You ain't lifted a hand to git me the Bar 7 since me and the boys staged that there hold-up a week ago!"

Too angry to realize the import of their words, the two men closed in on each other. It was then that Larry felt herself thrust aside, her gun grabbed, and before she knew what was happening, Tom Brown stood in front of her, pointing her own gun at the two brothers.

"Up with 'em!" he commanded.

Instantly both Jucketts whirled and aimed at Brown. Zeb's shot went wild; Malachi's was never fired. A bullet from Tom Brown's automatic had bored through his lung. A second bullet shattered the bone in Zeb's right arm. Cursing, they sank back, Malachi on the floor, Zeb on the bunk to nurse his bleeding arm. Tom Brown leaned over and collected their two guns.

"What I want to know—" he said smoothly, towering over them, "is how you two found out who I was?"

"Postmaster," said Zeb laconically.

"Oh," said Tom Brown. "You traced my return address and found out I was Robert Dennison, eh? And decided you wouldn't have any outsiders messing up your private preserves? That was a bad slip—me forgetting you owned everything and everybody in Yucca Flats, clear down to the postmaster.

"I'd thought that, as a bus driver, I could kinda question around unnoticed-like and find out the truth about my ranch, the Bar 7. *Unnoticed-like!*" He laughed shortly. "Larry, will you just tie their hands while I stand guard? That rope up there over the rafters will do nicely."

Dazedly, Larry obeyed.

"You can't prove a thing—not a thing!" snarled Malachi from the floor.

"We ain't confessing a word!" snapped Zebulon.

Tom Brown glared at them in baffled silence. It was Larry, whose eyes were resting on the horsehair fob still entangled in the trigger of the automatic, who gasped out, "Look—don't you see? It's Malachi's braided fob! I found it the morning after the robbery, tangled in the handle of Zeb's bag. After you got out of the bus that night to move the log, and Malachi's bunch grabbed you, Zeb managed to put out the lights long enough to kick his bag out through the door. The rest was simple."

"You can't prove nothing—" muttered Zeb.

The doorway darkened. Nobody seemed surprised to see Dr. Wheatley standing there.

"Well, folks, I guess I've heard enough to prove a-plenty. Seems as though considerable hangs on that there innocent little fob!" He put it carefully in his pocket. "And it's likely that considerable *may* hang because of that little fob too!"

He removed the gun from Tom Brown's, or rather Robert Dennison's, hand, and motioned the two to come outside.

"Guess these fellers need medical attention worse'n they need guardin' right now. You two go on up to the house in my car and send for the sheriff. Better tell your father, Larry, that it was a right smart notion of his that sent me down to see about that treatment Zeb was advisin' for a sick dog!"

He stood in the doorway and watched the retreating pair—watched them until they reached the shadow of the cottonwoods, where they paused and seemed to melt into each other's arms. All that was visible of the girl was a pair of hands clasped tight around the back of the young man's neck.

The old doctor smiled and rubbed his hands together as he turned back into the cabin.

"I declare, Zeb, if you wasn't right. They do seem to be powerful curative qualities in somethin' tight about the neck!"

This Foolishness Called Love

By Clark Welch

She said that love was all foolishness, when a handsome cowboy laid his heart so reverently at her feet. Perhaps she was right, but when a girl is lovely and a man is strong and brave and the sunshine is streaming down on the gorgeous rangeland, it doesn't look so bad—in fact it really doesn't seem, right then, that anything else in the world matters except that foolish thing called love.

"NO, Cliff," Jean Darrow said emphatically, "I won't marry you! I'm vaccinated against the silly disease called love!" Then she entreated, "Please be sensible. Let's drop all this and talk of something we can agree about."

"Drop it? Well I should say not!" Cliff Langley objected. "Why, Jean, you're the only girl I've ever looked at. You're the only girl I've ever loved. You're the only girl—"

"No, I'm not the only girl; not by a whole worldful," she interrupted. "It won't be long before you'll find another one; then you'll say, 'Darling, there was once a girl called Jean—I guess her last name was Darrow—I thought I was in love with her!' You'll both have a good laugh at that funny one."

Cliff started to speak, but finding words inadequate to express his thoughts, he continued, instead, to gaze imploringly at the bewitching little figure beside him.

Deep blue eyes, she had, with lashes that sent shadows across her cheeks; hair the color of aspen leaves after the first frost; a mouth made to smile and usually fulfilling its purpose.

She was wearing riding clothes. Khaki knickers, a mannish shirt and

broad-brimmed hat. The shirt was faded, and the knickers had been mended more than once, but things like that didn't matter. To Cliff, Jean Darrow was the sweetest, the prettiest, the most desirable girl in the world.

They were standing beside the sagging gate that led into the Darrow yard. The full rays of a yellow noonday sun washed the color from the prairie, from the road that stretched its wall along a section-line fence, and from the three-roomed house squatting fifty feet back of the gate. Only the distant mesas and beyond them the white-capped peaks of the Sangre de Cristo range, towering to meet the blue Colorado sky, relieved the monotony of the level country.

Jean returned Cliff's gaze, quirked her head to one side and studied his face with frank approval. "You're the very nicest man I know, Cliff. Good-looking, too, with nice eyes, and a nose and mouth that just escape being too perfect. But it would be almost as bad as the two of us signing a suicide pact for me to promise to marry you."

"Jean, girl, I don't get you when you talk like that. I—I love you, Jean." He laid a beseeching hand on her arm.

She patted the hand and removed it with deliberate care. "So you've said before, but in your present state of mind, I won't hold you accountable. I'll go right on having common sense for both of us. Why, Cliff, just think what happens all around us. Two people think they're in love. They have nothing, but they rush off and get married. In less than a year the girl is a frump and the man is a grouch.

"It isn't the fault of either of them. He can't afford to hire help for her, so she is too busy to take time to curl her hair, or powder her nose, or change her dress, or even smile. And he looks at her and thinks: 'So this is the ball and chain I hooked onto myself! This is what I've got to look at for the rest of my life! Whatever made me think I wanted her?' No, Cliff, none of that for me!"

"But—Jean, I'd never think that about you. I wouldn't marry you if I didn't intend to take care of you. I—"

"Cliff, wait, you don't understand." Her blue eyes grew suddenly misty. "I hate to say this to you, Cliff. We've grown up together; always been friends. We like the same people, laugh at the same things. I'm terribly fond of you. But we might as well be honest. It isn't that you don't work and make good, too, in a way. But you're—well, you're easy. You'll never have much of this world's goods and that won't worry you a bit.

"Cliff, I'm different," she went on. "I know it sounds selfish and hard, but always I've dreamed of a time when—Oh, I don't want to grow old like Mother—cooking, washing, scrubbing. I don't want to marry a man and have him always slaving because of me. Nothing but work, work, work! How much has Dad been able to save all these years?"

The girl turned toward the buildings behind them. "Look at Dad's barns and corrals. Look at the house where Dad and Mother and I have always lived—a three-roomed adobe!"

She paused and Cliff did look at the house. Maybe it was small, but those were good walls, laid straight and even. Hollyhocks splashed crimson and pink and green against them; flecks of straw, sticking out of the adobes, glinted in the sun; the blue door and window frames seemed like part of the sky pulled down; even the wash tub, hanging against the side of the house and the clothes on the line gave the place a homey, lived-in look. It all seemed good to him. It was where Jean Darrow lived; maybe that had something to do with it.

The impatient *honk, honk* of a horn came from down the road. Jean and Cliff wheeled to see a shining new car swerve to escape hitting a rattling old buckboard.

When the driver of the car, a heavy-set, oldish young man, reached them, he slowed down as though intending

to stop; then, with a pragmatical wave of his hand, shot ahead, showering them with a cloud of dust.

The buckboard tilted and sagged, lurched to the middle of the road again. The woman who was driving the old white mare hitched to it, shifted her lines and leaned to one side to smile as she passed. Gray hair showed under the brim of her discouraged felt hat; wrinkled brown skin told of a losing battle with sun and wind. But her dark eyes radiated happiness; there was a youthful lilt in her voice.

"I got more than your father expected for the beans, Jeanie. I've bought everything you wanted and, besides, I've got a surprise for you and Dad." She chuckled as she turned in at a gate near the corrals.

Jean waved her hand and returned the smile, but sobered instantly. "Now, doesn't that show how things go in this world?" she asked Cliff. "Ed Vogel has money. He owns a big car but Mother has to mosey along in a buckboard. Ed's one of the directors of the Tasco Bank, so the rest of the ranchers step aside and let him be nominated for county commissioner.

"Ed Vogel owns more land than anybody else," she went on moodily, "so the new surfaced road must go past his place. Mother doesn't mind the buckboard. She and Dad put up with this road—dust all summer and mud all winter. They just accept such things. But Cliff, I don't accept them. You're a lucky man that I know myself and refuse to marry you and make us both miserable."

"But Jean, everybody likes your father and I never thought Ed Vogel—"

"Now don't blame Ed, Cliff. Ed holds on to what he's got and takes whatever else the world hands out to him. He's shrewd when it comes to business, but I admire him for it. He was telling me last night that he'd buy out Harvey Bent's place as soon as Harvey dropped some more money in cattle and grew reasonable about the price.

"And why shouldn't Ed buy it as well as anybody else, if Harvey's going to lose it anyway? Besides, don't forget that it was Ed who gave fifty dollars toward a new roof for the schoolhouse at Bent's Corner."

Cliff stepped nearer. His tall figure leaned toward her; his eyes clouded with fear; his face grayed.

"Jean, you don't—? You wouldn't—? I know Ed Vogel's been hanging around here. Jean, you haven't promised him, have you?"

The girl's hand tightened on the gate post, but she looked straight into his eyes and smiled. "Ed Vogel asked me to marry him, if that's what you mean, but I told him what I've told you—I don't want to marry anyone—now."

Cliff turned and walked along the fence. He stooped and lifted his horse's foot from a loop in the reins, hesitated; then, pulling his mount after him, he strode back to the girl.

"Jean, I just want to tell you that I won't give you up. Why, look at your mother and dad; they've always been—"

"Perfect darlings, but a pair of slaves to hard luck for all of that. Mother and Dad married for love."

"Yes, that's what I was going to say. They married for love and it looks to me like they've had the thing they wanted most. Jean, I don't believe there's a happier woman in the world than your mother."

Ten minutes after Cliff had ridden away, Jean still stood by the gate gazing down the road. Then she squared her shoulders and, firmly admonishing herself not to let sentiment get the best of reason, walked into the house.

IT was not until the round-up party at Harvey Bent's ranch, that Cliff saw Jean again. Twice he had left his work on the range and ridden in to see her, but he had had no luck.

"Ed Vogel brought his car and Jeanie went with him to Tasco to a movie," Jean's mother had said. And another

day, "Jeanie and Ed took their horses and rode away together more than an hour ago." Then, in answer to his further questions, "No, I don't reckon she can go to the dance with you, Cliff. She said she'd promised to go with Ed. But won't you come in and wait to see her? They ought to be home by now." Mrs. Darrow had shaded anxious eyes and peered down the road.

But Cliff hadn't waited. What would be the use if Ed Vogel was with her? Cliff wanted to see Jean alone. He wanted to talk to her. Why, he had enough to take care of a wife. He had his ranch besides the store at Bent's Corner — the store that was his home too. His father had opened the store in one room of the adobe house he'd built for his bride, and afterwards he added the big room in front for his increased stock of goods. After his father had died, he and his mother had kept the place, and now that he was alone he still held on to it.

Cliff thought of his store with pride. Stock-feed, groceries, hardware, even saddles and bridles — everything the ranchers and cowboys needed. It was in a good location, too; at the crossroad on a corner of his ranch. An old empty building belonging to Ed Vogel was opposite, and cata-cornered across was the Bent ranch house, with the district school a quarter of a mile on down the road.

It was a lucky thing that the Bents lived so near to him; old Grandpa Bent looked after the store so he didn't have to neglect his cattle. That helped the Bents out, too. It would be too bad if Harvey Bent lost his ranch. But Jean! Surely Jean couldn't have meant what she said the other day. Well, at least he had an even chance with Ed Vogel and Ed should never have Jean!

CLIFF had been late getting to the round-up party. Now he stood watching Jean across the big dining room that had been cleared for dancing. Flickering rays of light from the coal-oil lamp in a bracket on the wall made a nimbus of light around her head. No wonder all artists made angels blonds, Cliff thought.

Jean was talking to Ed Vogel. Ed, with his slick-fitting clothes and shining shoes. His hair looked as if he'd rubbed it with shoe blacking and then brushed it, and his hands, thick, stubby hands, were white like a woman's. He had a ring on his little finger that folks said he'd paid a thousand dollars for, but you couldn't believe everything you heard. Now Ed was leaning so close to Jean that his face almost touched her hair.

Cliff started to work his way through the crowded room toward them, but before he had taken five steps, Jean's eyes lifted and chanced to meet his own. She smiled at him, but an embarrassed blush reddened her face and throat. Suddenly Cliff knew that the conversation she'd been having with Vogel had been about himself. The blush told him that; it also told him Jean was relieved that he had not heard what had been said.

Grandpa Bent took up his fiddle and another dance started. Cliff turned miserably back to the door and listened to the talk about beef prices, cars for shipping, winter feed. In spite of himself his eyes followed Jean and Ed as they circled the room.

At last the jigging music stopped. Grandpa plunged his face into a glass of beer. The cowboys and their girls scattered to the edge of the room, onto the porch, into the moonlit night. Ed Vogel led Jean to a chair and carelessly threw someone's hat on the floor to clear another chair for himself. He almost backed Mrs. Olsen and her baby on to the floor after the hat, as he sat down. Then a man on the other side of the room beckoned to him, and Jean was alone.

Mrs. Olsen smiled and shifted her baby to the other arm as Cliff took Ed's empty place. Cliff was the kind that everybody smiled at. That is, everybody but Jean Darrow. There was a decided pucker over Jean's blue

eyes as she pulled her skirts to one side to make room for him.

"I've been wanting to see you, Jean. Did your mother tell you I'd been out to your place; that I wanted to bring you to this dance?"

"Yes, she told me." Jean tapped her foot impatiently on the floor. "She told me that, and Ed Vogel told me about your latest business transaction. Oh Cliff, you're a darling, but if it was raining money, you'd put on your slicker and sew up your pockets."

"Business transaction?" Cliff was puzzled. This must be what she and Vogel had been talking about. "What business?"

Jean lowered her voice but the softened tones did not disguise a certain raillery. "Ed says you took a rocky hill that wouldn't feed a self-respecting gopher, in payment for what you'd advanced to Harvey Bent. Cliff, why didn't you force a sheriff's sale and make him give you some of his good land or his cattle? He took your money. You could have done it. Ed Vogel said so. Why didn't you make him pay?"

"Aw, Jean, I couldn't have done that. Harvey's been kind of hard up."

"Hard up! Yet he has money to own a car; to go to the movies in Tasco; to give a party like this. He has money to waste! It's just as Ed Vogel said. Ed said it was only right to make a man like Harvey Bent stick to the letter of the law. He said it was better for them in the end, and better for the money to be in the hands of people who know how to take care of it. Ed said if he'd been you—"

"Ed Vogel can mind his own business!" Cliff's lips drew together. "Harvey's flivver's so old it won't run half the time. And what if he does take his wife to the movies? A woman's got to have a little pleasure when she works like Katie does. This party didn't cost anything to speak of; the cowboys all threw in to help pay for it. I reckon Ed Vogel's enjoying it as much as anyone.

"I'll get my money back in time, but I don't care what Ed says. I'd lose my place before I'd force Harvey Bent on the rocks. Why, Grandpa Bent helps me in the store and Harvey's got a family. It was Harvey's oldest girl who took care of my mother at the last, and Harvey's uncle always let Jim Aitkins use his water hole, and Jim's a sort of cousin of mine, and—"

"And I suppose if Harvey's great-uncle had once loaned your fifty-second cousin a flea-bitten mule, you'd give the great-uncle your ranch and insist on Harvey taking your store!" She shook her head and laughed, but there was an edge of scorn in her voice. "Cliff, it's things like this that make you so adorable as a friend and so impossible as a husband."

"But Jean, there's some things a man's got to do to keep his self-respect. Now, if I'd done as Ed Vogel suggested—"

"You'd have the money to do the kind of big thing that Ed Vogel is doing."

"What big thing?" Cliff's voice showed his surprise.

"Ed's going to help start a store that will belong to everyone around here, the Cooperative Mercantile Company. He's donated a strip of land and the building he owns here at Bent's Corner across from your place. The building's to belong to the company as long as they use it for a store; you see he's made money, so he can afford to be generous. And he's thought of you, too, Cliff; he won't let you lose anything. He says he'll get the company to buy your stock and make you manager."

For a long moment Cliff was silent. A cooperative company would clean his store out. Grandpa Bent would be looking for another job. But he didn't want to work for the company; he didn't want to give up his place.

Cliff thought of the buildings clustered near. The two-story frame, sagged and empty, that Ed Vogel was offering to donate. The school that

hummed with life all week and took on the dignity of a church the first Sunday of each month when the Baptist preacher came to minister to his scattered flock.

Then he thought of his own flat adobe; big cottonwoods towering over it; hitching-rail; hoof-marked dust. Storeroom in front and four living rooms back of that; the show window decorated with empty tobacco cans by Grandpa Bent. "The men folks does the buyin' in this country; that's what looks good to 'em," Grandpa insisted.

Cliff would see the ranchers flinging themselves off their horses, pushing through the screen door or sitting down on the bench out in front, arguing, swapping yarns, spreading the news of the sparsely settled country. He could hear Grandpa Bent's treble voice breaking into the conversation. And now, a cooperative store!

Why, cooperative stores had been tried here before; they'd always gone broke. Still, with Ed Vogel back of it—Ed wouldn't hook up with the thing unless there was more than an even chance of success, and if Ed made money, the rest of the stockholders were bound to—

"Won't it cost a lot of money to fix up that old building?" Cliff demanded of Jean. "There's a bad foundation and a wall that would have to be pulled out and—"

"Now, Cliff, don't be upsetting the chuck wagon," Jean objected quickly. "Ed's explained everything to me. I've been thrilled to death to hear what he's going to do. I've seen a lot of Ed lately, and people misjudge him. He—he's really wonderful. He's sold stock to everybody, even the squatters.

"Now they'll all have a chance to buy their supplies at wholesale with only the added expense of running the place, and, with the organization, they can demand top prices for what they have to sell, too." She glanced around the room. "Oh, Cliff, they need someone like Ed to help them; look at the men in work clothes and the women wearing shabby cotton dresses and—"

"The men probably refused to change," Cliff answered, "and the women look pretty happy to me, even if they ain't dressed up. Listen to that bunch in the corner laughing like—"

But Jean did not hear him. She sprang to her feet as Ed Vogel crossed the empty floor. "Here's Ed now; let him tell you about it."

Cliff got up and surrendered a reluctant hand to Ed's effusive clasp. He'd never liked Ed; maybe it was because Ed had always wanted Jean. But he couldn't let Jean think he was a dog in the manger. He'd have to ask Ed about the store.

"Yeh, we're going to get started in less than a month," Ed answered his questions.

"And Jean tells me the company's going to have your building across there on the corner; that they're going to fix it up and—"

"Well, what's the matter with that?" Ed's voice sharpened. "It won't cost as much as to buy a place. I'm giving it to them."

Cliff eyed Ed quizzically. What made Ed so touchy? Must have expected him to object to the store being there. Well, he wouldn't object. He'd never let Ed Vogel know that he cared. "I hope you make a go of it. Here's luck." He let Ed take his hand again.

Ed wiped his forehead with a large purple handkerchief. Grandpa's fiddle began to whine again. "Come on, Jean." He laid a possessive hand on the girl's arm, and before Cliff could protest, had danced away with her.

Cliff sank back onto his chair again. Jumbled thoughts raced through his mind. If he lost his store he wouldn't be so able to take care of a wife as he'd thought he could. He was depending on what he made at the store to feed his cattle through the winter.

Jean had said that Ed wanted to give him a job, but he wouldn't take it. He wouldn't back down and eat out of Ed's hand! Still, maybe it was pretty little of him to feel that way

about Ed. After all, if Ed was trying to help folks— But Ed would clean him out doing it! No, he wouldn't have anything to do with the new store; he'd starve first.

He felt beaten, helpless. Jean and Ed danced past; her skirt brushed against him. Suddenly he wanted to elbow through the crowd; to snatch Jean out of Vogel's arms; to carry her away from Ed—from everything. He'd never known he loved her so much.

He got up and walked to the door, but did not hear the hum of voices around him. He loved Jean! He'd never give her up! He stepped forward eagerly to claim a dance as Jean and Ed pulled away from the crowd and stopped beside him.

Jean was speaking. "I—we—Cliff, I wanted you to know before anyone else. We've always been such good friends and now you and Ed must be friends, too." She paused and twisted at the flower on her shoulder; then she lifted her eyes to Cliff's face. "I'm going to marry Ed," she said simply. "Won't you wish me happiness, Cliff?"

Cliff took her hand and mumbled something; he could never remember what. He was glad to have Katie Bent come up and take Jean into her arms. Katie had heard what Jean had said.

Cliff backed away from them. He had taken his hat from a nail by the door, when Ed Vogel touched him on the arm.

"Say, Cliff, I've never felt that you liked me, but as Jean says, we ought to be friends now." He paused, but as Cliff stood tongue-tied, he went on, "Jean—we—want you to have charge of the new store, but of course if you take the job you'll want a good block of stock. I'm going to show my friendship right now by offering you some of my own stock at a little under the market price. It's a fine thing, Cliff. How much do you want?"

"I don't want any!" Cliff flung the words after him as he hurried through the door and down the steps of the porch.

He oughtn't to have spoken to Ed that way, he argued to himself as he rode for hours across the prairie under the star-decked sky. He oughtn't to blame Ed for getting Jean just because he'd lost her. But Jean! Jean! How could he ever live without her!

CLIFF kept away from the Darrow ranch now that Jean had said she was going to marry Ed. He didn't have any right to be hanging around her. He tried to forget the girl, but made poor work of it. He not only thought of her, he dreamed of her. Jean on her pinto pony against a blue Colorado sky; Jean flitting about the old adobe house, joking with her mother, sitting on the arm of her father's chair, patting his cheek, her blue gingham dress matching her eyes, her short sleeves showing rounded dimpled arms; Jean laughing; Jean singing.

He saw Jean in Vogel's arms, dancing away from him, twisting at the flower on her shoulder. "I'm going to marry Ed." Always his thoughts came back to that. They ran in a circle like a rope coiling about him strand by strand, binding him, torturing him.

Fall passed. The aspens in the high mountains that had fluttered their leaves like tiny golden flags against the deep green of spruce and pine, now stretched bare branches to the sky. The sumac that had crimsoned great patches along the hillsides were only twisted brown sticks.

The new store at Bent's Corner was finished. It had cost far more than the stockholders had expected. Nothing but a lonesome old shack on the prairie —who would have thought that a new foundation, three extra-sized windows, a reenforced wall and a few gallons of paint and varnish could add up so fast? But the place was in good condition, almost like a town store, and the expense would soon be forgotten when the profits began to roll in.

The shining shelves and long counters were piled high with groceries and

dry-goods. A cousin of Ed Vogel's had been hired for temporary manager and everybody came to buy. More than they could afford maybe, but pshaw, didn't the store belong to them in a way? Wasn't it a profit-sharing arrangement?

Cliff's store across the road was deserted. The screen door that had banged back and forth, back and forth, now hung silent on its hinges. There was a dead stillness about the place. Nobody came to pay what they owed; nobody came to buy any more.

Grandpa Bent trudged loyally to the store every day, started a little fire on cold mornings, swept and dusted, built seductive new pyramids of tobacco cans in the window, and waited for customers who never came.

Cliff saw Jean often; there was hardly a day when she did not appear at the new cooperative store across the road, but he seldom spoke to her.

"You've entirely deserted me, Cliff," she complained to him one morning when they chanced to meet. "Just because I'm going to be married is no sign I have the smallpox. Why haven't you been to see me—and Mother and Dad? I don't believe in this 'she's engaged so you mustn't speak to her' business. I don't believe in this foolishness called love. You know that."

"Well, I thought—" Cliff hesitated.

"Then stop thinking and ride over to the ranch this evening." She pulled off her glove to button her coat, but when she saw Cliff's eyes catch the sparkle of a large diamond on her finger, she quickly pushed her hand into the glove again and left her coat open. She laughed mirthlessly. "Am I to lose all of my friends because I've decided that Ed Vogel and I can make a successful marriage?"

But Cliff did not go to the Darrow ranch. Twice during the next week Jean walked across the road and begged him to join forces with Ed Vogel and the rest of the ranchers. Then one morning she wouldn't listen to excuses.

"I've worried a lot about you, Cliff," she said, and puckered her lips thoughtfully. "It hurts me to come into your empty store and know that the new place is getting all your business. It takes away all the joy of our success."

She pushed her hands deep into the pockets of her sweater and stood before him, feet apart, head lifted. "Now I've come to the conclusion that you're just stubborn, Cliff Langley! Why won't you snap out of it? Why won't you take the job that's been offered to you?" Then, her voice softening, she put her hand on his arm. "Please, Cliff."

Cliff turned from her. His eyes traveled around the empty room. Maybe it had been stubbornness that had held him. Stubbornness and the hurt in his heart at losing Jean. He really didn't have cause to act this way. Jean had said he was easy going, but he must be kind of mean, too. And if it hurt Jean— Well, he'd let them buy out the stock he had on hand and close up his place; then if a job was still open—

"Maybe you're right." His eyes were troubled but he put his hand over hers. He wanted to please her, but it was hard to give up—to let them take his place. "I reckon I'll sell out to the cooperative store," he forced himself to say.

"Oh, Cliff, I'm so glad!" Her face glowed; all of her dimples came peeping out at him. "You can't know how happy you've made me! When Ed started the new store I never realized how much you'd want to keep this place, and I've felt just criminal." She frowned at the thought but quickly smiled again. "Now we'll all work together—that is, if you'll let me come in to help you sometimes," she added demurely.

Cliff listened as she made plans about what they would do, but his heart was heavy. It wasn't going to be any easy thing for him to see Jean every day, talk to her, have her friend-

ly this way, and be constantly on his guard lest he say the things he longed to say.

"I could just skip and dance and sing, I'm that rejoiced," she exulted, taking his hand and twirling him around.

"I wish you wouldn't tell anyone yet about what I've decided to do," he warned her as she was leaving. "I want to make some arrangements about that before I talk business with Ed."

She promised the deepest secrecy and waved him a joyous good-by as she ran across the road.

When Cliff told Grandpa Bent the news and offered him his salary, the old man objected. "I ain't goin' to take no pay. I ain't done no work for it—there ain't been none to do. But Cliff, I—I hate to close down." His faded old eyes grew bleary at the thought.

Grandpa Bent stood looking at the stove standing in its box of clean sawdust, at the inviting, though now empty circle of boxes and dilapidated chairs around it, at the glass case that held the candy he and the school children had picked out as the best kinds, at the miraculous adding machine Cliff had sent away for when he found a few mistakes in the figuring. The mystery, the accuracy, the wonder of that machine had never failed to intrigue him. Cliff watched him shamble to the counter and touch the buttons reverently.

Well, it couldn't be helped. Cliff turned to his desk and wrote to a wholesale house in Denver. Could they send a man down? he asked. He'd decided to sell out and wanted to make a settlement with them. As he signed and sealed the letter, he reminded himself, "I'm doing it for Jean," and got what comfort he could from the thought.

A week later the man came. Cliff overtook Katie Bent on the road as he was driving into Tasco to meet him. She was starting to the Darrows—going to help Mrs. Darrow sew and get things ready for the wedding. It was a long way and Cliff could give her a lift. Her tongue flew as she climbed in beside him and the car sputtered ahead.

Jean didn't act like a girl who was going to be married, she said anxiously. The girl took no interest in her clothes or things for her new house. She was all taken up with the store Ed Vogel had started.

Katie had heard some complaints about the store, but Jean said there wasn't a thing in them. She said Ed showed her the books and explained them to her and that everything was going fine. Ed had carried the books clear over to the Darrow ranch because he didn't like Jean hanging around the store; didn't want the future Mrs. Vogel hobnobbing with every Tom, Dick and Harry, Katie supposed.

But it seemed like Jean couldn't keep away; especially this past week, she'd been fixing the place up like she was expecting a visit from the Prince of Wales.

Cliff kept his eyes on the road ahead of him and Katie babbled on, "Ed and Jean are to be married before Christmas, probably as soon as Ed gets back from Kansas City where he's going next week to sell his steers. He wanted to be married right now and take Jean with him, but she wants to go to Californy after the wedding." Cliff was glad when he could drop her at the gate in front of the Darrow house.

It was past noon by the time Cliff and Mr. Aller from the wholesale house had finished their business. The latter had begged Cliff to try to hold onto his store. "We hate to lose a good customer like you've always been. Your father bought goods from us when we first started in business. We can carry you for a while. I'll take this inventory back with me, but we won't sign up any agreement till you've had time to think it over again."

Cliff shook his head, and Mr. Aller asked, "Do you know how the place across the road is coming along?

They're buying a good deal of us—the boss said while I was down here I was to have a talk with them, too."

Cliff didn't know for sure, but he'd heard they were making good. There was plenty of business for a store if it was run right, and of course it was only natural for folks to buy where they owned stock and were getting things at bedrock prices. He'd made up his mind that if they wanted his stock he'd let them have it. He wanted to get clear out of the country. He didn't add that his desire to leave had come since his talk with Katie Bent that morning.

"Well, let's hope you'll change your mind." Mr. Aller picked up his hat and Cliff followed him to the door. As they opened it, they found themselves facing Jean Darrow.

When she saw the stranger she began to back away, but Cliff introduced them. "Mr. Aller was just starting across the road to the cooperative store," he added.

"Yes, I want to see Mr. Vogel. Is he there?"

Jean looked inquiringly from the stranger's face to Cliff and back to the stranger again. "No," she said, "Mr. Vogel is at his ranch. I don't know when he'll be back, but perhaps I can help you. I know all about the business."

Mr. Aller rubbed his chin and cleared his throat. "I wanted to get that four o'clock train. I'd hate to have to make another trip out here, but— You say you know all—all about the business?"

"Yes, I've been over the books with Mr. Vogel a great many times. He consults me about everything. I'll be glad to talk to you." They left Cliff standing in the doorway and walked across the road.

It was an hour later that Mr. Aller returned and announced himself ready to leave. Cliff told Grandpa Bent to wait until he got back, and the two men climbed into Cliff's old car.

Before they drove away, Jean appeared. She stopped when she saw them and took two quick steps in their direction, then turned and hurried toward her horse.

The ride to Tasco was a silent one. Both men were busy with their own thoughts. Cliff worried all the ten miles there and back. Was it his imagination that Jean's lips were firm set; that her face was unusually white?

He'd only caught a glimpse of her, but there was something tense about her expression, something angry about the way she raked her horse with her spurs and tore away. Had he done something to displease her? Now that he was going away and never see her again, he'd hate to have her remember any but pleasant things.

He pulled up at his store at last and stood with Grandpa Bent, watching a bunch of ranchers roll from their horses and drop their reins. Jean was with them and Ed Vogel opened the door of the store to let them in.

Grandpa was all for going across the road to discover the reason for such a sudden gathering, but Cliff pulled him back. "It's a directors' meeting, likely. We'll keep out of it. Come on in and let's get ready to lock up."

But Grandpa didn't seem able to tear himself away. He had to finger the boxes on the shelves; be sure the lid was tight on the can that held the opened sack of sugar. At last he took a fly-specked calendar from the wall. "Do you reckon it would make any difference to that man if I took this with me? It ain't got no value and I've jotted down things on it from time to time."

Cliff had been so busy with his own thoughts that he had forgotten the old man. "No," he turned apologetically, "you can take it and the adding machine, too. I kept that for a parting present—thought you might get another job and need it."

So, hugging the magic treasure under one arm, Grandpa Bent at last walked out of the store and allowed Cliff to lock the door.

But he almost dropped the machine as a girl in a red tam and sweater came like a flash of fire across the road toward them. She was excited, breathless. Her words came haltingly at first. Grandpa listened open-mouthed to what she was saying.

"Oh, Cliff, Ed started that store to get his buildings fixed up for nothing. He was going to force you to sell out to him, then close the cooperative store and start another one—all for himself. He fooled me—everybody! He had two sets of books. I found out everything when I talked to that man you brought down here."

Cliff tried to speak, but she put out a hand to stop him and, with trembling lips, she hurried on, "I rode right away to tell the stockholders—just took time to leave Ed's ring and a note in the cash register, telling him I'd never marry him! Never!"

Sudden tears welled into her eyes. "It would have been my fault, Cliff, if he'd gotten your store. Oh, I'm so thankful he didn't get it! He'll have to give his building to the stockholders; he wouldn't dare not to after what I've found out, but it will take the store and everything to pay the awful debts—and all the time I believed—"

She was unable to say more, as Cliff was holding her close against his shoulder. "He'd like to smother the girl," Grandpa thought. And Cliff was patting her arm and kissing the top of the little red tam and now lifting her face to his own. Grandpa wiped away a tear that had started to run down his cheek. When Grandma Bent was young she'd looked at him like this girl was looking at Cliff.

But Jean's voice brought him back to the present. "I've been such a fool, Cliff," she was saying. "Such a silly fool!"

"No, honey." Cliff stopped her words with another kiss. "How could you know—"

"But I do know! As soon as I found he was trying to hurt you, I discovered that there is such a thing as love! I know that in comparison to love, nothing else matters!"

"And will you marry me, Jean?" Cliff pleaded. "Even though I'm easy?"

"Please, Cliff, don't remind me of how foolish I've been. If you were one bit different, I couldn't love you the way I do. If you'll take me to Tasco, I'll marry you to-day."

Cliff lifted her from the ground and carried her to his car. "Climb in, Grandpa, you're starting to a wedding!"

But Grandpa made them wait. "Give me the key to the store, Cliff," he insisted. "I want to get this addin' machine back on the counter. I can't 'tend to the rush of business we're goin' to have to-morrow without it!"

Outlaw Kisses

By Clee Woods

Betty Joe's rosebud mouth was made for kisses—but not for stolen ones. Yet, through no fault of hers, first one hombre and then another touched those pretty lips, before the sacred moment when the right man came to claim them for his own.

BOB KING stood before that little bank window, as steady as a giant suhuaro on a calm desert night. Yet the twenty-four-year-old cowboy was all turmoil within.

This was not, however, because he had any warning of the disaster hovering over him, but solely because there behind the cage window sat comely, slender-faced Betty Joe Mason. She was clerk in the bank of her cowman father. Just now, though, the banker and cattleman was absent, and his daughter was acting as cashier in his place, as she often did. King was the only customer in the bank just before closing time.

Even though she sat on a high stool, Betty Joe's deep blue eyes had to look up considerably to the tall young cowboy's lean, weather-stamped face. It was not exactly a handsome face, but there was strength in its long lines and firm, clean-shaven jaw. And especially in his quiet dark eyes. His coal-black hair had just about succeeded in curling, as he stood there with big gray sombrero in hand, trying to tell the little cowgirl banker that he had come to claim the twelve thousand dollars in gold which had been put on deposit there for him.

King had never been in Saddle Mesa before, nor had he ever laid eyes on Betty Joe Mason until this moment. The money had been left him as his share of a gold strike made by an old prospector whom he had staked two years before, and whom he had nearly forgotten all about.

"Yes, the money is here," Miss Mason told him, and King wondered how a woman's voice could be so low and sweet. "Father was expecting you to-day. He had to go away, but he has the papers all ready for you to sign. Let's see; yes, we have your signature, and if you'll sign there, and there, I'll turn the money over to you."

She turned the papers about and shoved them through the window. King took them hesitatingly. Instead of paying attention to what she had been saying, he had been guilty of gazing at the touches of gold made in her auburn hair by the glint of afternoon sunlight which was seeking her beau-

tifully crowned head through a window.

"Where, ma'am?" he had to ask.

He hardly heard her the second time, because she smiled up at him as her capable little forefinger found the proper dotted line again.

When the papers had been completed, she turned back to the open vault door. King knew that twelve thousand dollars in gold weighs close to forty-five pounds. Yet he saw her pick up a buckskin bag and swing it out with an ease that told of reserve strength in the slender lines of her lithe, supple young body.

Somebody came in through the door behind him. He did not turn until he saw a look of dismay spread over the banker girl's face as she set the bag of gold down in the window. Then he whirled about. But it was only to find himself face to face with the gaping muzzle of a six-shooter, in the hands of a lone, unmasked man.

King swallowed his astonishment. Only the night before had he stayed with this man at an unused line camp far back in the Piñona Mountains. He was a dapper, fine-built fellow of handsome, dark face and cunning, alert gray eyes. King had told the man not a word of his mission here, but he felt instantly that the bandit knew of this big payment in gold. It would make the haul that much richer, in addition to the bank's usual cash.

"Raise 'em, cowboy!" the bandit ordered with an ease that proclaimed him beyond the tyro stage of his profession. "You, too, in there, my little Betty Joe."

There was a hard, mocking laugh in the bandit's voice now. King wondered why. Behind him he heard the girl smother an exclamation of baffled feminine rage.

King himself did not mean to let the robber have his little fortune. Already he had contracted for a small ranch up the country, and this was the bulk of his payment.

He had a single Colt swung low on his right hip. The man had him caught cold, but there was a chance. His body came down ever so slightly, preparing for a lurch sideways. Then his fingers tensed for the break to his gun handle.

"I said shoot 'em up," the bandit snarled impatiently.

The next moment King's gun would have come leaping out in unequal draw against the bank robber. But Betty Joe Mason's two hands reached out through the window, one to seize him by the right arm and the other to lay firm hold in the collar of his gray flannel shirt. She had sensed his intended attack.

"You mustn't, Mr. King!" she called. "Let him have the money. Please—for my sake!"

With his intentions thus given away, King saw that it would have been utter folly to have charged the bandit with that cocked six-shooter in level readiness. Such action would have imperiled the girl, too, he was reminded. He therefore pushed his hands up. The girl did, too.

"Come out, Betty Joe, dear," the bandit ordered. "Take Mr. King's gun and hand it to me."

The young woman did as she was told. Her face was white one moment, then burning hot and red the next. Watching her, King suddenly got the notion that this bandit was no stranger to her. Queer looks were passing between them. Looks that left the girl's face whiter than ever. The robber's next words confirmed the cowboy's hasty conclusion.

"Thanks, Betty Joe." The fellow was smiling ironically at her. "You've been mighty nice in helping me so much. I won't forget it. Now you and your customer back around into that cage."

Not even yet did the girl say anything to the bandit. King thought he saw in her face, though, a battle to suppress an inward tempest of feeling.

"Come on; move!" the bandit snapped. "You'll get over the shock,

honey. I'm awful sorry I have to leave you like this, really, but by now my trail might be pretty hot for a Texas sheriff—and something like twelve thousand dollars makes it easier to part, ha, ha, ha!"

The face of the young girl blanched at those words. Then a deadly calm settled over it. She went backing into the cage, still without having spoken to the bandit. King had no choice but to back after her. Without giving her one chance for the least trick, the bandit made her go into the vault and bring out the bank's cash. Then he drove King and the banker's daughter back into the tiny vault, which was little more than a large safe set in the wall.

Twice Bob King stopped, debating whether or not to try grappling with the gunman. Each time he was brought backing on into the vault by the girl's petition to think of her safety.

"At-a-girl, Betsy, save me from drillin' him," the bandit taunted. "You might want him for a sweetheart, seein' that I won't be able to call very soon again. But no love-makin' there in the dark now till you get good acquainted anyhow. Adios, honey, and believe me when I tell you I'm durn sorry I have to run off like this."

The heavy steel door came pushing shut. The bolts slipped into place and the pair were left in total darkness. There was barely enough space inside for King to keep from touching the young woman's body.

In that first moment of imprisonment King felt a riot of emotions course through his veins. First, the strange, overpowering something that swept over him at being locked up there in such close proximity to the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. Then the thought that, in spite of her petitions, he should have done something to prevent this.

Now he could hear faintly the bandit scooping up the money and stalking out the front door with it without a challenge. That sound, in turn, brought a momentary disappointment in the girl, for three times she had checked his thoughts of fight, rash though they were, with pleas for her own safety. Was she a coward, he wondered.

No! That answer came rushing back to him with the vivid memory of her face, both before and after the bandit's appearance. That girl was no coward, he told himself. He could feel that, even now, so close to her there in the blackness of the vault, though she continued to keep silent.

"Miss, how quick do yuh reckon we can get out?" he asked.

"Not till Dad comes back," she answered, "for he's the only one who can open the vault door. He went out to our ranch ten miles from here. It'll take three or four hours to get word out to him and then get him back here, even if they find him quickly."

"That'd still give me time, maybe," King said, as much to himself as to his prison companion.

"Time for what?" she asked.

"To catch that hombre," he told her. "Last night I stayed at a lonesome line camp of the K D Ranch, way back up in the Piñona Mountains. No cowboy was there, but this hombre was holdin' down the camp. Now I figure he will take off one way, then circle back there, for I happened to see some grub he had cached under the floor.

"More'n likely, he'll aim to sleep a few hours there late to-night, on his way out of the country. The distance is about handy for him to hit there around midnight, and he'll figure nobody can trail him at night anyhow. Course, it's only a bare chance, but it's mebbe the only one to loop him in quick."

"You mean," the girl asked thoughtfully, "that you'd try to get there before he rides off at daylight?"

"Yes'm."

Silence fell between the pair for five minutes. Then the girl spoke again.

"Mr. King," she inquired, "if I asked you not to follow that man would you

let him go and say nothing about having seen him at the line camp?"

King was thoughtful. Then he began to grapple with something new in his life—jealousy. Intense, burning, hating jealousy.

"I knew," he said to himself, "there was something between her and that rascal. Now ain't that like a woman, lovin' the ornery cuss and wantin' to protect him, even though he give her the outlaw ha-ha like that?"

"But he's got my money," he finally objected aloud to her request. "I've gone and bought a little ranch up on Circle Seven Creek, near Hermosa, and it takes this money to pay out on it."

"But—but suppose I have a mighty strong reason for asking it?" she insisted.

"Yuh'd have to tell me the reason," he answered frankly.

It was a long silence that followed. Excited people began to gather in the bank now, shouting, exclaiming, wondering. King had to shout lustily through the door to them. Soon the sheriff was at the vault door.

"Give me some description of the bandits," he called.

Betty Joe laid a hand on King's arm. "Please don't give him away," she begged.

"But they might catch him," he once more argued, "and twelve thousand dollars is a lot for me to lose. Besides, look what your dad's bank is losin'."

"Yes, I know," she agreed, "but—but—" Here she broke off for a moment. Then she suddenly shouted through the steel door, at the sheriff's second demand for a description of the bandits, whom nobody outside could recall having seen at all.

"There was only one bandit, Mr. Leeraine," she shouted, "and he was masked. But Lew Dunbar is mighty close after him by this time, I'm sure. Follow Lew, and he can give you a hot trail."

King could hear the sheriff turn and blurt out questions at the milling throng in the bank. Then came more questions through the door. The girl beat King to each answer, and shrewdly evaded the questions she did not want to answer, without making any false statement. But, while the excitement grew and then subsided outside, King was thinking of her avowal that the lone bandit was masked, and also wondering who Lew Dunbar was.

But he did not betray the girl's story now. He was naturally too gallant to contradict her statements just then. Somehow, too, he unconsciously had begun to regard this bandit as a rival, and he would prefer to follow the man himself, instead of putting the sheriff on his trail. The truth might as well be told. Bob King had never met a girl, before, who had attracted him as much as the lovely creature so tantalizingly close to him, there, in the inky prison, even if she was foolish enough to go on caring for the bandit who had mocked at her affection for him.

"I know," she began to him, after half an hour had quieted things down outside, "that you think I lied about the bandit's being masked. He was masked—to me. That bandit was Lew Dunbar, and for the past month he has been hiding his real self, the bandit blood, under the mask of a perfect gentleman."

Here she hesitated for a moment. Then she went on, with a biting bitterness creeping into her voice, "He kept coming to see me. Told me he loved me. But he was only using me! For he wormed around until I foolishly told him a few days ago that you were expected to-day, to get all that money.

"All along he had been waiting for some big haul, and this was a nice plum. After I had hesitated to tell him I would marry him, he left with the promise that he would come again. I thought he went away to give me a chance to make up my mind. But now, from what you say, it was all planned so he could lay his string of caches along his route for a quick getaway."

King's elbow was touching her shoulder, and he could feel that shoulder tremble violently. But a trace of joy had leaped into his heart.

"She wasn't plumb fool crazy about the sneakin' coyote," he was telling himself, "or she wouldn't have hesitated when he kept poppin' the question like that."

But his joy was short-lived. Why, he was forced to ask himself, was she seeking to shield that hombre from the law, now that he had proved himself a common bandit, if she did not love him? He asked her that very question.

"Because," she answered frankly, "he made a fool out of me when I told him about your coming for the gold. Now I want to get even by capturing him and bringing him back myself. That's why I don't want anybody else going after him."

"Bully for you, Miss Betty Joe!" King praised, once more convinced she was not hopelessly in love with Dunbar. "I shore believe yuh could do it, too. But something might go wrong, and I wouldn't want yuh out there in that coyote's power. So I'm goin' along."

"No, you're not," she objected. "I want to do it all by myself. Lew Dunbar has made me out a laughing stock, a—a foolish woman! I must show him! And everybody!"

But King was just as determined not to let her go off by herself, even though he conceded her right to bring Dunbar back. There the matter rested between them, unsettled.

Time dragged by. The air in the place was getting bad. Worse and worse it grew, until they both were gasping for breath. King seemed to be suffering the most, doubtless because he always had lived in the open, where fresh air never ceased to come to his deep-chested lungs.

Within another fifteen minutes he had to sink limply to the floor. There the slightly better air seemed to revive him for a time. But he was having to use all his will power to keep from clawing at his own throat. Betty Joe was hovering down beside him.

Their bodies were wedged close together now in the cramped, squatting position. King was fighting desperately to keep breathing and at the same time to keep his right senses. Yet in that dire moment he was not dead to the wild exultation that beat in his heart at the unavoidable touch of her person against his, and at the caress of her hands on his forehead as she, with true womanliness, discovered his greater agony in smothering and sought to comfort him. Still no rescue was at hand. Then all at once Betty Joe began to succumb to the lack of air.

"Mr. King," came her voice, weak now, "I'm afraid—it's possible I might faint. Promise me, won't you, that you won't go—out after Lew Dunbar until—until—I prove to you I'm able to—to make the ride, too. Promise, quick!"

She had seized one of his hands in both of hers. Her grip was strong at first. She was struggling heroically to refrain from mad, futile fighting for air. Then her clutch slackened. King feared she was going. He could feel her face close to his.

What was he to say? He hated to give Dunbar one minute more than he had to. Yet how could he refuse this girl? Why bother, anyway, for no rescue was in sight yet and they both might be taken out dead.

"Yes, hon—Miss Betty Joe, I'll promise that," he told her.

The power of the will cannot always control the physical body. The young woman gave way in this smothering only enough, though, to clutch at her throat, to twist about in agonized writhings and then to clutch wildly at his arm. That was all, before she slumped down in a swoon, head on his shoulder and hands falling limply to her lap.

For a full minute King sat without moving a muscle. But his brain was in chaos. His heart was beating madly.

He knew that he, too, must soon succumb to the smothering. Suddenly he struggled to get his arms up. Then they reached out and clutched the girl's unconscious form to him. In fierce defiance of his conscience he held her there. Slowly his lips moved down to where he knew hers were; small, bowed, red, tender. Then, with a wild abandon, he crushed his lips on hers.

The next moment he thrust her from him, panting not so much from the lack of air as he was from the mad ecstasy of the outlaw kiss. Outlaw to him because he had no right to touch her lips, even when they both might be dying.

Then came the sounds of a greater excitement outside, a rush, the ticks of turning tumblers. They had got Banker Mason quicker than Betty Joe expected. King was in a quandary. He knew questions would be hurled at him as soon as he got his breath. What did the bandit look like? How came Lew Dunbar to see the bandit? Why did Lew go off as he had? And a hundred others, the answers to which certainly must betray Dunbar.

To avoid these questions until the young lady herself was ready to act, King decided to pretend that he, too, was unconscious. When the door opened, he was slumped over, lifeless.

They had a doctor there waiting to administer to the two stricken prisoners. They carried the girl to her home. In order that Saddle Mesa's only doctor might look after both at the same time, King was put in another room of the Mason home. There he continued to feign unconsciousness, until after nightfall. But he was listening eagerly to what the hushed voices were saying about Betty Joe's condition. At last he heard the glad word that she had revived, was getting better. Then that she had suffered a relapse.

"King, you're playing possum!"

It was the doctor's accusing voice. King knew he could not fool the medical man any longer. He therefore opened his eyes and sat up.

"Well," he inquired, with a sheepish grin, "can't a feller have some fun out of a mess like that?"

"But the sheriff is waiting for information," the doctor scolded. "Miss Betty Joe is too ill to be questioned. I've put everybody out of her room and given her a sleeping potion. Now you get on your clothes and come on out to tell the sheriff what you know. Lew Dunbar went off on some wild goose chase, but nobody along the way he went had seen any bandits riding ahead of him. The sheriff now has to start all over again."

While he dressed, King was trying hard to think up evasive answers for Sheriff Leeraine's inevitable questions. He delayed facing the officer as long as he could. He decided that he would give the man no satisfaction. While the exasperated Leeraine was still plying him with questions, the doctor came out.

"Miss Betty Joe is not in her bed," he announced, "and her window is up!"

The alarm spread quickly to the town. Betty Joe Mason had been spirited away. But Bob King alone knew where she had gone. He remembered now her peculiar request, that he should not go after Dunbar until she had proved she was able to make the ride, too. Well, this proved that she thought she was able, anyhow. And King had a sneaking notion that she, too, had pretended to be far worse than she really had been, just to get this chance to steal away ahead of him and everybody else.

"The strong-headed little filly!" he said to himself. "She'll mess up things and let Dunbar get away dead shore, just because she has got that notion to bring in the tricky cuss by herself. I'll have to dust it now, to catch up with her and be at that line camp cabin afore mornin'."

During the excitement caused by Betty Joe's disappearance, King evaded the sheriff and everybody else. He found his horse still at the hitch-rack near the bank, and rode unnoticed out

of the poorly illuminated little town.

But Betty Joe Mason had got quite a start on him, and she was riding hard, too. It would take hard riding to reach the mountain cabin before day. Not until after midnight, when the moon was up bright, did he overtake the determined young woman. She did not try to conceal her disappointment in not being allowed to go on after Dunbar alone.

"But a young lady don't have no business out after a skunk like him," King maintained stoutly. "It takes a man to handle that scurvy cuss."

"I'm not blaming you for your views," she replied, "but just the same, I think I could bring Lew Dunbar in. And it's going to be the biggest disappointment of my life that you won't let me. I've just got to do it, to redeem myself in my dad's eyes, when he hears how I let Dunbar wheedle that information out of me."

"Nope, can't let yuh take no such chances, Miss Betty Joe."

HARDLY were the first streaks of dawn opening the day when the pair, now afoot, went stealing along the trail toward the Piñona line camp cabin. The little hut had only one door, and this was on the opposite side from that on which they were approaching.

They had to work around through the aspen thicket at the upper edge of the cabin, to gain the door. As noiselessly as possible, they circled. Every few feet they stopped, to listen for sounds from within. None came.

A twig broke on the hillside just above them. Both whirled their heads that way. King could see nothing, not even a chipmunk, in sight. They started moving on. Before this, Betty Joe had been ahead. Now she let King take the lead. He heard something jingle lightly behind him. When he glanced back, she was holding up a pair of handcuffs to his view.

"Got them out of Sheriff Leeraine's saddle pockets on his horse out in front of our house," she whispered smilingly. "Let me see if I can work them."

She took hold of one of his wrists. Again King was swayed by that magic intoxication of her touch. There was something unreal, something indescribably alluring about being alone here with this fair creature, in the cold gray of morning. He, smiling back, turned to give her the other wrist. No harm in humoring this bewitching creature. If Dunbar were in the house, they could get him any time now.

"Here, around this tree," she almost giggled, motioning toward a dead aspen near them.

It was impossible for him to think of trickery or danger at this girl's hands. He would have thrust his head into a lion's mouth when she smiled at him like that and bade him do it. So, under the spell of Betty Joe's thousand allurements, King rashly put his hands behind him, backed up to a six-inch aspen and let her click the handcuffs about his wrists.

"All right, Lew; I've got him!"

Betty Joe was leaping back from the cowboy as she uttered the cry. Bewildered, dazed by the sudden turn of affairs, King looked about him. Nobody else was in sight. No stir came from the cabin.

"Lew, don't you see what I've done?" she cried again. "This man knew you would come here, so he came to catch you. I fooled him and everybody else and came along. Come on out. I saw you up there."

Lew Dunbar raised up from behind a big rock at the upper edge of the aspen thicket. He had been wary. Even though his cabin did seem safe, he had slept a little away from it, since it was a fine night.

"Well, of all things!" he now exclaimed, eyeing closely the captured King. "Betty Joe, now I know you're crazy about me. Will you go on with me, after what I've done? Tell me, quick, darling!"

"A woman loves hard, Lew," the girl replied, "after she once finds it out. I'd do anything on earth to have you now, Lew."

"I can hardly believe it's you, darling," Dunbar exclaimed delightedly. "And it does take that big sap of a cowboy shackled up there like that to convince me you mean it."

The bandit put down his rifle and came striding toward her. But he had not holstered the six-shooter which he had been carrying in his hands. Betty Joe had a small gun on her hip, but she took this off and tossed it toward the oncoming man.

"That's my final proof I mean I want you, Lew," she smiled coyly. "Come, take me in your arms, dear. Nobody else is on your trail, and that poor goose is too busy hugging the tree backward to trouble you."

Bob King stood there shackled helplessly to the tree, and watched all this with lower lip bit tight. Something gripped at his heart, cold and steely, when the girl fell into Dunbar's eager arms. When Dunbar tried to shower kisses on her lips, she snuggled her head down against his breast and received the kisses on her forehead and head. Poor King had to look on, with cold sweat out on his brow. Then he braced himself against the terrible pain tugging at his heart. What a fool she had made of him!

"Just like a woman," his sterner self scolded harshly at his weaker self. "I shore let her make one fool outa me. Look at that."

Dunbar was forcing her head back, not to spare her lips any longer. The hand touched the handle of the six-gun that Dunbar now had holstered.

Suddenly Betty Joe Mason flounced out of Dunbar's arms. She had snatched out the bandit's gun as she started the break. Now she leaped backward from the amazed Dunbar and brought that gun flashing up into his face.

"Now, do you see how I want you?" she cried. "Yes, I do want you—for the pen! You used love-making to get that information about the big payment of gold. It was only fair play for me to use it to make you pay for what you did with the information. Put those hands up!"

Bob King became a new man. He could have shouted for sheer joy. But his joy was turned quickly to fear. Dunbar had been standing with hands clenched tight and face black with rage. Now he took a slow step toward Betty Joe.

"You haven't got the nerve to shoot me," he gritted. "Go ahead, shoot!"

He stood erect and beat his hands on his broad chest. A leering dare was on his face. He took another step toward her. She took two steps backward.

"No, you're too tender-hearted to shoot me," Dunbar laughed. "Here I come. You can't shoot me down, Betty Joe."

"Stay back or I will!" the girl cried, alarmed at his actions.

All at once Dunbar made a quick lunge toward her. Her gun fired, but the bullet did not stop his rush. Before she could fire again, he was upon her, grabbing for her gun wrist. She tried to tear herself out of his clutches, but he held her tight with one hand and fought for the gun with the other.

The moment the break came, King started surging at the tree to which he was anchored. It was not a large tree, also it was dead and might be uprooted. Now he dropped down a little, braced his feet out before him and threw all the might of his hundred and eighty pounds back against the aspen. He heard the dead roots pop rottenly. Dunbar was tearing the gun from Betty Joe's hand. King saw her glance toward him, and renew her fierce battling.

Once more King heaved mightily on the tree. The roots broke off near the top of the ground. Over backward with the tree King tumbled. Then he wiggled along until he could get his arms off over the butt of the tree.

By the time he got to scrambling

up, though, Dunbar had torn the gun from the girl's hands. Now he was clutching her to him with one hand and training his gun on King with the other. Like a fierce little tigress, Betty Joe fought to divert his aim.

King was leaping up. Dunbar fired. The bullet crashed into King's shoulder and knocked him backward. With an anguished, despairing cry, Betty Joe fought loose enough to seize Dunbar's gun arm and sink her white teeth into it.

Blurting out an angry oath, Dunbar sought to tear her loose. But she held on with all the might of a woman aroused to super-feminine strength. Bob King was struggling to his feet again.

Now, bent over like a mighty full-back going through center, he came charging for them. Into Dunbar's ribs he bored his head. Over the three went, in a wild scramble. Betty Joe rolled away from the two men and seized a sharp stone in her hands. But as she whirled back with it, Dunbar shoved the muzzle of his gun into King's head and pulled the trigger.

King wilted down, half across Dunbar's prone figure, and a crimson spot flushed out and down across his white face. The sight of that lent greater fury to the blow Betty Joe brought crashing down onto Dunbar's head before he could whirl to stop her. The stone hit hard. Dunbar grunted and tried to dodge. Again the battling girl struck. The second blow only drove Dunbar to more desperation. He shifted his gun about and fired at her.

Unmindful of his aim, though, Betty Joe threw all her remaining strength into the next blow. It landed flush on the side of his head. Down he slumped, fingers twitching at the trigger.

Betty Joe leaped over, took a key from her boot top to take the handcuffs off King, and then clicked them onto her captive's wrists. Then she dropped down and gathered Bob King's head up into her arms. The bullet had only ripped a furrow along his head, and now her hands brought returning life to him.

"Oh, how foolish—crazy I've been!" she cried to him. "All because of my idiotic notion to capture Dunbar myself. But I had to do something and do it quick, when that twig broke and I caught sight of Dunbar watching us from around that rock."

"It was a mighty smart trick, that trussin' me up to fool him," he smiled up at her, "even if it drove me plumb hog-wild to see—to see what went on."

"Oh, I wish I hadn't done it, for now you're shot all to pieces because of it."

"Nope, not so bad as all that. I'll be saddle-able inside of two weeks. And say, Betty Joe—"

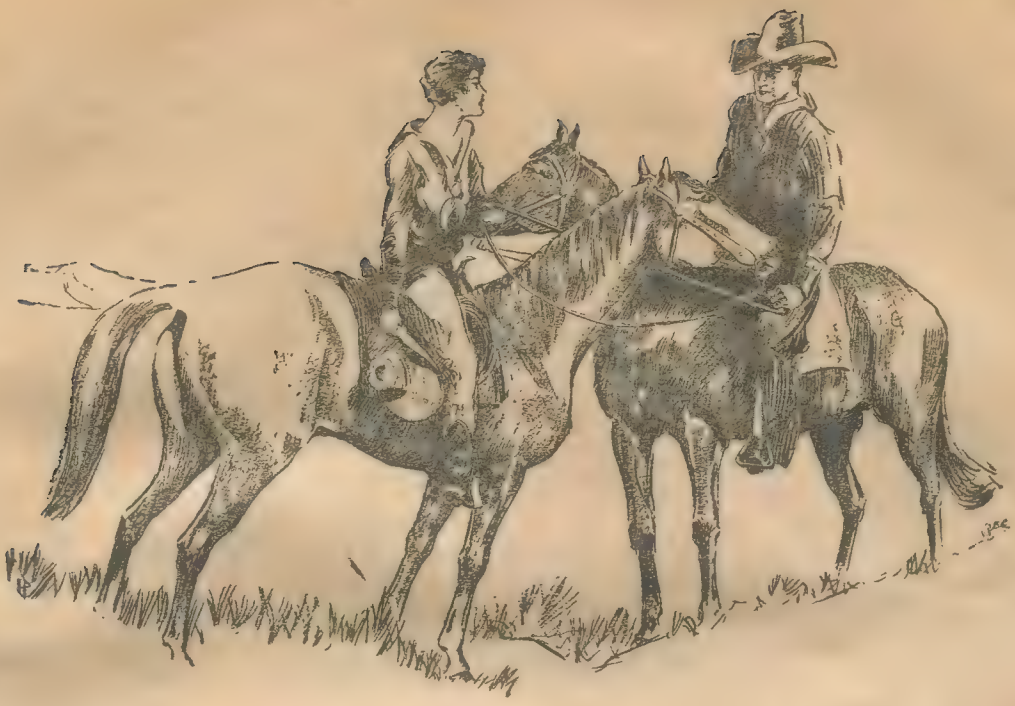
"What is it, Bob?" as he winced slightly from the pain returning to his numbed, shattered shoulder.

"There's an outlaw kiss loose 'tween me and you."

"What—what do you mean?"

"I stole one after you went loco there in the vault."

"Bob! And I was going to take several right here, if you hadn't wakened up so quick!"



Sue of Sunset Pass

By Lupe Loya

Their trails ran far apart. Sue rode with a wastrel who might throw her precious love to the four winds of the rangeland—but she loved him wildly. The cold and silent hombre who watched over her, rode alone, too proud to claim her from another man. Then came a day when their trails crossed, and Sue wondered which man could really bring to her love's greatest treasure.

"I'VE allus told yuh, Sue, that I wouldn't interfere none when yuh picked the man yuh wanted tuh marry," said Amos Judson, his knotted fingers tampering awkwardly and nervously with the bit of tobacco in his old calabash pipe. "I ain't interferin' now. I ain't even dwellin' on the fact that I'm some disapp'inted. I'd kinda hoped—but why speak of it? The p'int is—"

"The point is that you don't think Bob Archbold is good enough for me—isn't that so, Uncle Amos? You think he's wild, a gambler. And you'd kind of hoped that I'd make a match of it with Greg Wakefield, didn't you?"

"Well, Greg is steady an' reliable—"

"And well-to-do," put in Sue, dryly.

"That's nothin' against him," reminded her uncle, sharply.

"No. But he inherited the ranch and the money, remember. He's all business, I'll admit that much. Cold and calculating as an adding machine, and just about as lov—"

"Here comes Greg now!"

The two on the porch of the old Sunset Pass ranch house watched their caller carefully close the gate behind him before proceeding up to the house. It was a characteristic gesture, and a fleeting, half-contemptuous little smile curved the girl's lips. Bob Archbold wouldn't have bothered with the gate, which stood open half the time, anyway.

"Hullo, Greg!" called out Uncle Amos, cordially. "We was just talkin'—"

"About what a pretty evening it is!" finished the girl, with a warning glance at her relative. She stood up. "I reckon I'd better be getting over to

Mag's, before dark. She's expecting me for supper."

"But I thought—" began the surprised Amos.

"Tell Bob, when he calls for me, that I went on ahead with some things Mag wants for the party," said Sue, relentlessly, and stooping quickly, brushed her uncle's grizzled head with her lips. A moment later she stood in the kitchen, where Aunt Hetty was getting supper.

"Greg Wakefield is out there, and I don't want to talk to him!" she whispered. "If he doesn't go in a few minutes, I'm going to ride over to Maggie's, without waiting for Bob."

"But the meal's all ready!" exclaimed her aunt, flustered. "Cornbread's all ready tuh take out o' the oven! We'll have tuh ask Mr. Wakefield tuh stay an' eat with us. It wouldn't be polite not tuh! I don't see why yuh act like this, Sue!"

Aunt Hetty was a comfortably plump little woman, with neat gray hair and a face like a withered apple. She loved her niece devotedly, but had long since given up the attempt to understand her. Sue's mother had been one of the Marchand girls, daughter of an impecunious French-Canadian trapper, who had "homesteaded" up on Crooked Fork in pioneer days. She had married Joe Judson, youngest and handsomest of the Sunset Pass clan, against the wishes of both families and in the face of the gloomiest prognostications by the local wiseacres.

The marriage had been a brief and stormy one and had ended tragically. No one knew just what had happened up at Joe's place on that cold December night. Amos, uneasy in his mind, had ridden out to the remote ranch, but too late to profit by the insistent warning of his premonition of evil. The bodies of Joe and his wife lay on the kitchen floor, a gun midway between them, and little Suzanne, then three years old, was found asleep and unharmed in her crib.

Aunt Hetty experienced a vague stab of anxiety as she looked at the girl now. With the height and the red-blond hair of the Judsons, she had her mother's smoldering black eyes and olive skin. It was those eyes that troubled Aunt Hetty. They were tempestuous, imperious eyes, and when Sue was excited she looked exactly like a red-haired incarnation of that little French devil who had wrought such havoc with the gentle heart of Joe Judson and brought such grief to his rigidly respectable and conventional family.

She sniffed the appetizing aroma of the corn-bread as Aunt Hetty, turning sharply, opened the oven door.

"Isn't it just my rotten luck to get cheated out of corn-bread!" she said, with a little-girl sigh and a wry grin. "Give me a snack out here in the kitchen, Aunt Hetty!" she begged. "I'm hungry as a bear! And there won't be anything to eat over at Mag's —not with all the fuss of getting ready for that dance!"

The older woman's breath caught in a little sob of relief. After all, Sue was a Judson—much more like her father than like her mother—and no matter how grown-up she became, or how many beaux she had, she would always be to Aunt Hetty an adorable, appealing little girl-child, to be petted and cherished and loved.

"You rascal! Well, here! Let me give it tuh yuh on a plate! It's too hot—"

Sue danced over to the table with the sizzling pone and dropped it gingerly on the white oil cloth. "Golly! I should say it *is* hot!" she giggled. "But good! Um-m!"

IF Greg Wakefield was disappointed at having Sue walk out on him in a somewhat pointed manner, he gave no sign of it during the comfortable meal and the comfortable evening that followed. He was a very self-contained young man, or gave the appearance of being so to one who judged solely by his calm, unruffled demeanor.

Wakefield was still considered something of a newcomer, having come out to the Pronghorn Ranch only five years before, but was respected and well liked by his neighbors, and counted a desirable addition to the closely knit community of the Candelaria district.

The young man never attended the local dances, seldom went to town except on business, and apparently indulged in only one extravagance—books. This idiosyncrasy was forgiven him on the score of his lack of social talents. He had to do *something* to amuse himself evenings.

When it had become apparent to those who interested themselves in such matters that the young owner of the Pronghorn was romantically concerned over Sue Judson, there had been a good deal of tongue-wagging. "Here's one at last that ol' Amos'll think is good enough fer that high-steppin' niece o' his!" was the tenor of the gossip, and because Amos Judson's stiff-necked pride was a bit irritating to some of his more democratically inclined neighbors, there was more than a tinge of malice in the subsequent rumor that his hopes had met a snag.

Bob Archbold was the disturbing influence, and even those who didn't like him were forced to admit that, as a rival, Archbold was a formidable proposition. The glamor of mystery and slightly tarnished romance which hung about him, added to, rather than detracted from a scintillating personality which allured even those who instinctively distrusted him.

Bob Archbold possessed that mysterious something called "It" to a profound degree. Son of a ne'er-do-well Englishman, reputed to be the cast-off scion of a noble house, and a half-breed dance hall girl, his nature was a battlefield of conflicting elements, a strange mixture of hopelessly intermingled qualities and defects.

Reckless, dissipated, sullenly moody and gaily defiant by turns, Bob was capable of petty hatreds and magnificently loyal friendships, tilting at life with weapons warped and twisted in the hot fires of inherited ignoble passions.

His indifference to and attraction for women had become a scandalous byword in the Candelaria district at the moment when Sue Judson stepped into the picture and upset all previous notions as to Bob's invincibility. Men either swore by him, or at him, but could not ignore him, and not all of his partizans, by any means, were the roistering scum of Candelaria and the neighboring village on the Mexican side of the Border, known as Noches.

He lived in Noches, or on the fringe of it, in an ancient adobe *ranchito* which had been in a decaying ruin even when his father had died there, twenty years ago. Shortly before the death of the elder Robert Archbold, a stranger had appeared in Noches and taken the ten-year-old boy away with him. Eleven years later, young Bob had returned and had resumed his life in the old *ranchito*.

The difference between the two was that whereas his father had been a slovenly sot and recluse, Bob was extremely fastidious in dress and demanded a certain degree of cleanliness and comfort in his living quarters; even his congenital weakness for drink and gambling was invested with a sort of distinction, a carefree effrontery patterned on that heritage of good breeding which had been all but smudged out in his parent.

Three times a year he called at the Candelaria post office for a letter bearing a foreign postmark; but the remittance served merely to stake him for a prolonged bout with the fickle goddess of Chance. If he won, he lived lavishly for weeks, or even months, only reserving enough to carry him through those lean periods when luck was against him; if he lost, he retired moodily to the *ranchito*, or loaded up hunting equipment and a couple of *mozos* on burros and disappeared in the fastnesses of the wild mountain region to the south.

Into this precariously ordered and independent mode of existence, Sue Judson had burst with devastating effect. It was only after she returned from several years away at school that the girl had taken any part in the meager social activities of Candelaria. Her lonely childhood at the old ranch in Sunset Pass had set her apart from the grubby, hard-bitten small fry of the sparsely settled district, and the fact that Amos Judson had imported a teacher for her was looked upon by his neighbors as an intolerably snobbish procedure.

"Thinks our kids ain't good enough tuh associate with that little red-headed orphant," the ranchers had remarked to one another. "Well, wait an' see! She's got other blood in her veins besides Judson blood—an' just wait till that Marchand strain starts kickin' over the traces!"

The Marchand strain had indeed manifested itself, but in a way to disappoint those who secretly hoped for the worst. Sue was vividly alive, alluringly lovely to look upon as her mother had been, but there the resemblance ceased. Her friendliness and wholesomeness and eager willingness to meet them halfway, had quickly won over the local young folks who had been prepared to dislike her.

Old hostilities and resentments were forgotten as the barriers of exclusiveness, erected by the Judsons in their hurt pride over Joe's mésalliance and its tragic end, melted under the warm smile of the daughter of that ill-starred union.

With the barriers down, it was inevitable that Bob Archbold should have entered. For one thing, despite his vaunted indifference to feminine charm, the Noches menace was never behindhand in personally investigating any new attraction along that line; for another, he had heard that Amos Judson had warned the girl against him. Such a challenge was not to be ignored. They met at a dance in Candelaria.

Hitherto untouched by the finer shadings of what a facetious poet once dubbed the "gentle" passion, Archbold had meant to come, to see, to conquer and then to ride away. Sue, on her part, had meant to give the celebrated trifler the come-uppance of his young life. It was perhaps inevitable that they should have fallen in love; inevitable, too, that the alien blood which throbbed in their veins should have involved them in some fiery conflicts.

The party at Mag's was in full swing, but Sue, waiting for Bob to show up, could take but a half-hearted interest in it. What was keeping him? It wasn't likely that he had lingered at the Sunset Pass ranch house, for he didn't find the society of her uncle particularly pleasant; yet here it was after nine, and he'd promised to call for her there at seven.

Little jabbing worries began to assail the girl. Unless Bob had met with an accident, there was no excuse for him being so late. The others were noticing it and commenting about it, in whispers, and Maggie Tillson was right down "put out"—as she had a right to be, seeing that her party was by way of being in honor of the engaged pair.

"No, I can't spend the night with you, Mag," said Sue, when the crowd began to disperse, just before midnight. "There's no way of letting Aunt Hetty know—and, besides, I want to go home."

Try as she would, she couldn't keep a quaver of anxiety and disappointment out of her voice, but Maggie Tillson, indignant and sympathetic, knew better than to put her feelings into words.

"Let some of the boys ride up by Sunset on their way home," she suggested. "It wouldn't be much out of Kit Melcher's way. I'd love to have you stay, Sue—"

"Somebody's outside askin' fer Sue!" called Maggie's little brother, from the front room.

Both girls rushed out, Sue's face

pale with sudden fear of bad tidings. Then she uttered a flat little "Oh!," as the lamplight fell on Greg Wakefield's tall figure outlined in the doorway.

"Your uncle asked me to stop by here and see if you might want an escort home," said the young man, diffidently. "Archbold sent a Mexican up to Sunset after you left, to say that he couldn't get here this evenin', an' Judson thought—that is, I—er—suggested."

The sentence dangled in midair, for the change that had come over the girl's face was not calculated to put Wakefield at ease. But, remembering the others, who were staring with avid interest, she controlled the surge of anger that swept over her and turned away quickly to hide the tears of vexation that had sprung to her eyes. "All right!" she said abruptly. "I'll get my things."

"Some girls would think you was lucky to have a man like Greg Wakefield crazy about you, Sue!" giggled Maggie Tillson, as her friend made short work of gathering up her belongings. Then, noting Sue's distressed look, she added, "But of course Greg can't hold a candle to Bob—for looks."

Mag's silly remark jagged through Sue's irritated train of thought as she rode, in silence, ahead of Greg Wakefield. Dusky moonlight misted the rugged contours of the mountain trail, and the earthy scent of spring and night saturated the air. But the romance and beauty of it was like a mockery to her. This was not the first time Bob Archbold had failed her, and she well knew what had kept him in Noches. He was gambling again. And after his many solemn promises to her!

The trail widened, and Wakefield touched his pony with the spur. He rode beside her now, quiet, aloof as ever, apparently unaware of her annoyance. She cast covert glances at him from time to time, at his broad shoulders swinging rhythmically with the gait of his horse, at the wide hat which cast a half-moon of shadow across his face. She almost hated the rugged dependability of that face, so different from Bob's volatile handsomeness. It was characterful, purposeful, unyielding, and so damnably self-sufficient!

Suddenly a mad impulse to test the quality of his reserve, possessed her. Maggie, silly chatterbox, had said that he was "crazy" about her. As though a snowman like this could get "crazy" over anything! Of course he was interested in her—there'd been plenty of evidence of that—but probably his interest was as cold and calculating as everything else about him. Looking over the field, he had decided that she, of all the girls of his acquaintance, was the most worthy to be honored with an offer of marriage. That was just about the way he'd do it!

"Mr. Wakefield—Greg!" she said, suddenly, and jumped at the sound of her own voice in that hushed stillness. "Will you do something for me? *Promise!*"

He looked at her, surprised, but the stern look on his face relaxed into the rare smile which even she had been forced to admit was attractive.

"Of course, Miss Sue! That is, if it's somethin' I *can* do," he drawled. His voice had a blurred Texas accent.

"Well, unless you promise, cross-your-heart, that you'll do it, I won't tell you what I want you to do."

Secretly she was laughing at his cautiousness. How like him not to commit himself.

"I want you to take me to Noches."

He simply stared at her, uncomprehending. They had come to a fork where the trail crossed the dim road to town, a mile or so south of Sunset Pass. She headed her pony down the road.

"But I didn't promise," he said. "At *this* time of night—and—Noches!"

"No, you didn't promise," she said, bitterly. "I suppose if I tell you that *I'm* going, anyway, you'll ride pell-mell up to the ranch and tell Uncle Amos! It 'ud be just like you!"

"But, Miss Sue! What d'you want to go to Noches for? It's getting on toward midnight, and—"

"Can't you guess?" she demanded, with an hysterical laugh. "I want to go and find out for myself what kept Bob Archbold there to-night. Something may have happened to him," she added, rather lamely.

"I'll go," he said, after a moment of silence. "But it's no place for a girl like you!"

"Why—like me!" she mocked, fiercely, glad to see that she was hurting him. His face was looking strangely white in the cold moonlight as she went on, "You know I'm going to live there, some day."

"Yes, your uncle told me to-night," he said, with unexpected calmness. "But I didn't know Archbold was goin' to keep that place over there. I mean, take *you* there."

"Why not?" she said, flippantly. "'Whither thou goest, I shall go,' you know. Bob's place is really very nice—inside."

"Then you've been there?"

"Of course! I'm engaged to him. I've been there several times. But not with Uncle Amos' knowledge or consent, naturally."

Again she laughed, and even in her own ears her laughter sounded harsh and somehow tawdry. He gave her a quick, pained glance, then looked away and began fumbling with the makings of a cigarette. She felt belittled and silly, and she was on the verge of tears. But her voice was cool when she spoke.

"Well, how about it, Mr. Wakefield? Are you game to ride over to Noches with me? Or does the idea strike your case-hardened propriety as too utterly reckless and daring?"

She meant to lash him with her scorn, but saw something perilously near scorn in *his* eyes as he looked squarely into hers.

"The idea strikes me as damned silly," he said quietly. "But if you're determined to go over there, of course I'll go with you."

Neither of them spoke again until a break in the rocks revealed a dim trail leading off to the south. "This is Bob's short cut," she said, turning off the road. "I know the way."

Now that she was fully committed to the adventure she felt frightened, but more frightened somehow by the change in his manner than by anything which might happen in Noches or the thought of the reckoning with her uncle and aunt.

Her escort's grim silence was not even rebuking; if it had been rebuking she could have taken some comfort from the fact; it would have shown that he still felt some measure of regard for her. It was disturbing to feel that she had fallen so in his estimation—a new and unpleasant sensation for a young woman who had taken masculine homage as her due.

But what did she care what he thought! He was nothing in her life, and never had been—never would be. It was Bob—Bob— At the thought of Bob, a lump came into her throat, and her eyes smarted with tears. She had felt so sure of him, so confident that his love was stronger than that devilish lure of gambling! Why, at first she hadn't even been afraid of the gambling, in spite of what Uncle Amos had said, and in the face of those vague rumors that had reached her. Plenty of young men gambled a little. What was the great harm in it?

Then one terrible night Bob had come to her, feverish-eyed, white-lipped, broken on the wheel of chance. She had never seen such a change in anyone; he seemed scarcely human as he raved and cursed against his luck. She knew he had been drinking, too, and pity had fought with loathing for his weakness. Somehow she had managed to keep him out of Uncle Amos' sight. They had gone for a long ride, and in the end he had promised on his word of honor never to do it again.

On his word of honor! How many times since then had he violated his word—and been forgiven! She didn't

dare count the times; she didn't want to think of them, to admit to herself that lately his lapses had been more and more frequent. Her own self-respect, her pride, had weakened under the onslaught; ideals, and high hopes for the future, had gradually faded. But love was left—blind, desperate love that clung frantically to remnants of dreams.

The cross cut trail widened out into a sandy arroyo, winding steeply out of the mountains into the vast, shadowy expanse of valley. Far ahead lay the twinkling lights of Noches, whose day began with sunset. Sue had almost forgotten Wakefield's presence as her pony's feet sank into the dust of the faint ribbon of road that led to the Rancho Archbold. What had begun as a mad impulse had now become a grim purpose. She would confront Bob in his iniquity—shame him—have it out with him! The driving force of pent-up emotion was no longer to be denied.

The old adobe ranch buildings sprawled in the moonlight. There was no light in the house. A mongrel cur slunk growling out of the shadows, and stood staring hostilely at the intruders. Sue felt a sudden sense of shame in the disreputable condition of the place, plainly evident even under the softening mantle of night. An unkempt patch of littered, weed-grown garden lay behind the broken cactus hedge that separated the house from the road.

"Pedro!" she called, in a low sharp voice.

A bundle of rags disengaged itself from the pallet stretched in front of the door, and resolved itself into the figure of an ancient watchman. The old man hobbled swiftly out to the road on soundless bare feet. He stared up at Sue with sleepy, red-rimmed eyes in which recognition slowly dawned.

"Is the master here?" she demanded, in Spanish.

"*El Señor?* Ah, no, *señorita!* He has not returned yet."

Pedro's crafty, wrinkled old face lit up with a glimmer of understanding as he stared at the mounted figures of the young Americans. His yellow, snaggy teeth bared in the caricature of a grin.

"If the young lady wishes, I will go and notify the master that she is here," he said, and spat contemptuously into the dust of the road. "It is not likely that he will return before sunrise."

Sue felt her face flame in the darkness. She was glad that Wakefield didn't understand Spanish.

"Where is he? Where is the Señor Archbold?"

There was that in her voice which reminded Pedro sharply that he was dealing with a lady, albeit a crazy gringo, and moreover one who might in the near future be in position to make things mighty uncomfortable for him. The ways of these gringos were beyond him, anyhow.

"But where would the master be, except at the *Cantina de las Flores, señorita,*" he whined, servilely. "Always he spends the evenings at the cantina, is it not so?"

Sue whirled her horse abruptly and headed it towards the lights of town. A myriad red-hot furies seemed to be riding her, lashing her on to the irrevocable end of this insane venture. She *would* see it through! She'd find Bob and literally drag him out of this pit, make him see what all this was doing to their love, make him understand! She'd fight that devil within him that was stronger than he, fight it with her bare hands, throttle it!

Suddenly Wakefield's hand was on her bridle, bringing her horse to a stop.

"Look here!" he said. "You're not going there — to the cantina! You're not—"

She jerked the bridle free. "Let me alone!" she sobbed, huskily. "Don't you understand? I've *got* to go—got to find him—"

He seized the bridle in a firm grip. "Listen, Sue! You can't do this thing! I know how you feel, but it's the worst thing you could do. He'd hate you for it. And you'd hate yourself. Wait

here, and I'll go over and get him—"

His voice was gentle with sympathy, but for that very reason unbearable. Why had she brought him along? Why had she bared the secret places of her heart to his chill, superior pity? Why was she letting him see Bob at his worst?

She jabbed with her spurred heel, and the pony reared backward with a startled grunt, freeing itself from Wakefield's grip. Her face was cold and white now, its tremulous quiver controlled.

"You don't have to come, if you don't want to," she said. "And anyway, it isn't such a terrible thing as you seem to think. There's always plenty of people — tourists — there at the cantina. Lots of Americans, sightseeing. We'll never be noticed."

They pushed on along the dusty road which began to narrow now into the semblance of a street. Straggling, outlying *ranchitos* gave place to squat, solid rows of adobe buildings, their stuccoed fronts grimly white and respectable in the moonlight. It was as though they consciously spurned the further end of the narrow thoroughfare, where lights gleamed fitfully on the outskirts of Noches' gay white way.

As they approached the center of the town, Wakefield took the lead and rode down a dim alley, Sue following, for she was not quite sure of the location of the notorious *Cantina de las Flores.*

"We'd better leave the horses here," said the man, dismounting, "and walk around to the front."

It was an evil-smelling little cul-de-sac, black as a hat, and evidently gave on the back premises of the gambling house. Their ears were now assailed with a medley of noises, floating through the murky air from the street towards which they picked their way.

"Better pull your hat down over your eyes," said Wakefield. "And here! Put this around your throat."

He drew a big blue silk handkerchief out of his pocket and deftly knotted it about her neck. Its folds, and the floppy hat, under which she quickly tucked stray tendrils of her bright hair, effectually concealed her face. In riding breeches and flannel shirt, into which she had hastily changed at Mag's house, from the frilly party dress left there, she might have been mistaken for a slim young boy.

"Now!" said Wakefield, as they emerged into the turgid glare of the street. "Stick close to me."

In the excited thrill of venturing into forbidden territory Sue almost forgot what had brought her to the *Cantina de las Flores.* She had never been in Noches after sundown before, and had never penetrated to this disreputable quarter of the town even by daylight. Noise, dust, the acrid smell of stale liquor and a jostling swarm of humanity, etched sharp, vivid impressions on her mind as she followed close behind Wakefield's tall figure as he elbowed his way into the cantina.

Her first glimpse was of a big room with mirrored walls and many small crowded tables, wreathed with a blue pall of smoke. Beyond a small polished square of dance floor a Mexican orchestra evoked a deafening misconception of American jazz, in competition with the shrill babble of many voices.

Opening off the cabaret was another big, smoke-shrouded room revealing a vista of long gambling tables around which crowded men and women, many Americans among them, like anxious birds of prey. This room was quieter, the tense silence broken only by a faint hum and the singsong chant of the croupiers.

A stab of pain that was like a knife-thrust shot through the girl as she took in the significance of that ominously quiet room. That was where Bob must be, oblivious of everything but that cursed lure! Wakefield had led the way to a table in a comparatively secluded corner, and now she was aware of a big waiter in a greasy

white coat, bending over them. Wakefield ordered ginger-ale for both of them.

She began to feel more at ease, to look about her a little, as the shock of being there wore off. Wakefield, too, had relaxed somewhat, and gave her a quizzical grin as she caught his eye. The look seemed to establish a comradeship between them, an understanding that was as surprising as it was comforting. For a blessed moment or two she forgot her heartache as she studied this new Greg Wakefield. How his bigness and cleanness stood out, there in that mongrel rabble! After all, Greg was a good sport. She had forced him into this thing, but he was certainly carrying it off.

At that moment the ginger-ale arrived, and the orchestra simultaneously burst into a lilting Spanish dance.

"Dolores! Dolores Visnaga!" somebody shouted, and half a hundred throats took up the cry.

Sue stiffened. She had heard about the Visnaga, recently imported from Mexico City, and gaudy posters of the woman had been stuck up all over Candelaria and other Border towns. "Nice" girls on the American side spoke her name in whispers.

Silence descended on the murky room as all eyes turned to stare at the lithe, sinuous figure that detached itself from the shadows of a booth directly opposite where Sue and Wakefield sat.

The girl — for she was young, Sue noted with surprise — moved with casual grace to the cleared space, silencing the roar of applause with a slight, imperious gesture. Slumbrous-eyed, white-faced except for the startling scarlet of her lips, Dolores Visnaga called to mind a beautiful, poisonous snake as she uncurled her slim body in the first voluptuous rhythms of the provocative dance.

Sue watched, fascinated and repelled. Even Wakefield had turned to stare, but as she cast a quick look at him she saw that his eyes had become steely blue and that they were not on the dancer, but were staring beyond at the occupant of the booth which had concealed her. The red curtains were drawn back now, and her companion was leaning with his elbows on the table gazing out at the dancing figure with a lazy smile of appreciation. The man was Bob Archbold.

The next thing Sue Judson was aware of was the feel of Wakefield's hand over hers where it clutched the edge of the table.

"I'm sorry, Sue!" he was saying. "I was a damned fool to let you come here—"

She found herself looking at him with a sort of dazed wonderment, and presently she was speaking, in a voice that seemed to belong to somebody else.

"Did you know? Did you guess—"

"Let's get out of here!" he said, almost roughly, and he started to rise.

She clutched at his arm, and said, "Wait!"

The dance was over. Dolores Visnaga, refusing the wild demand for an encore, swayed slowly back to the booth, smiling her slow red smile at Bob Archbold. He stood up, reached for a velvet wrap flung over her chair, slipped it on her shoulder, and, with an air of triumphant proprietorship, guided her through the maze of tables to an exit at the back.

IT was that pallid hour between darkness and dawn when the fading stars, like ghosts taking leave of the night, sparkle fitful curtsies in the vast, chill anterooms of heaven. The dying moon hung spectrally above the black peaks behind Sunset Pass. The old ranch buildings, a gray, indefinable shadow against the darker mass of the hill, had the mysterious, vacant look of any sleeping thing.

Greg Wakefield had dismounted and was now engaged in unfastening the clumsy gate — barbed-wire, swung on poles—that he had so carefully closed after him a few hours earlier. Had it

really been only a few hours before? Sue wondered numbly, as she watched him. A few hours! It seemed years ago—something that had happened in a remote past, when she was somebody else. That feeling of being a stranger to herself, of not being present in her own body, had persisted on the long ride home.

Wakefield had swung the gate open, and now stood waiting for her to enter. Then he started to walk along beside her as she guided the pony up the path toward the corral.

"You needn't bother, Greg," she said. "I can unsaddle all right."

"But I'm going in with you—to explain to your aunt and uncle," he said, quietly.

"Not now!" she exclaimed, aghast. "It's almost morning! They'll think I spent the night with Maggie. They won't have worried about me."

He looked uncertainly up at the looming bulk of the house, and then moved on up the trail. "I can put your horse up, anyhow," he said.

She waited for him at the corral gate, and they stood there for a few awkward seconds, neither one of them knowing what to say. Then she held out her hand.

"You're—you're awfully nice, Greg! Awfully—kind! I don't know how to thank you!" Her voice caught in a tremulous sob.

He stood looking down at her, holding her hand. And then, suddenly, her face was pressed against his flannel shoulder and she was crying her heart out like a hurt child.

As she clung to him his arms closed tightly about her, but it was up at the faint crescent of moon that he looked, and not down into her tear-wet face.

"This isn't the time!" he muttered, fighting for self-control. "Isn't—the—time!"

"What isn't the time, Greg?"

She was looking up at him, almost smiling, and something he saw in her face made him forget his good resolution.

"To tell you I love you, Sue!" he whispered, but before she could answer he swept her up into his arms and carried her to the kitchen steps. Gently but firmly he put her down, and quietly opened the kitchen door. Then she heard his boot heels crunch purposefully down the trail. Heart pounding wildly, she listened breathlessly to see if he'd close the gate after him.

But this time he forgot it.

Buried Treasure

By Eli N. Richardson

ALTHOUGH Captain Kidd never sailed over the Nevada Desert, which, according to the archeologists and geologists, for some millions years was one vast sea, nevertheless, if the stories told and retold by aged Indians and the gray-bearded pioneers are true, Nevada has its full share of buried treasure, as well as numerous "lost mines."

In the early days of Nevada, robbing stages was almost as important an industry as bootlegging is to-day. Being held up in some lonesome spot—and there are many such spots in Nevada even to-day—was all in the day's work of a stage driver. The story goes that in the year of 1880 the stage operating between Genoa, Nevada's oldest city, and Placerville was held up and robbed of $20,000 in gold. The gold was packed in small kegs and easily handled. The robbers were never caught.

A few years ago a man lying at the point of death in Montana confessed that he was one of the two men who robbed the Genoa stage. He told how they took out $2000 of the money and buried the rest at the foot of a tree at the outskirts of Genoa.

Some years later a number of those who knew of the dying man's story formed a syndicate and made a trip to Nevada to search for the buried treasure. They never found it, although many days were spent in digging around the roots of the trees still standing in the now almost ghost city of Genoa.

Out in what is known as Hell's Canyon, west of Tonopah, there is an old stone cabin that at one time was the rendezvous of one of the worst bands of outlaws that ever terrorized southern Nevada. For several years this gang of cutthroats and robbers held up stages and conducted periodical raids on the outlying settlements. It is said they buried much of their loot somewhere in the canyon.

The last exploit of these bandits was

to hold up the Sodaville stage carrying the payroll of the Northern Belle Mine at Candelaria, now a ghost city. It was the last straw. The superintendent of the Northern Belle, a burly Englishman, hired a notorious two-gun man, known as Rattlesnake Dick, to hunt down the robbers.

Rattlesnake Dick recruited a posse of five or six men, all "dead shots," and took the trail. In about ten days Rattlesnake Dick returned to Candelaria and made his report. It was not a long report. It was told in three words. "We got 'em," he told the superintendent. No questions were asked. Everybody was satisfied.

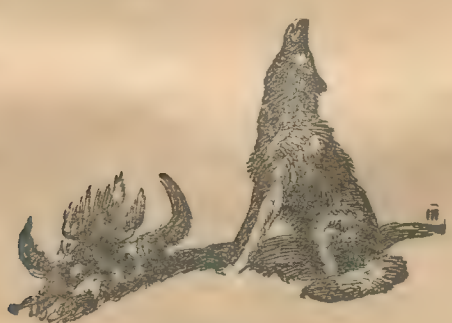
Many similar stories might be told of ill-gotten wealth buried by early-day bandits and which they never retrieved.

But all of Nevada's buried treasure is not in gold, silver or jewels; a few miles south of the little mining village of Beatty, down at the edge of the Amargosa Desert, there are sixteen barrels of buried treasure that in these "moonshine" days appeal more strongly than gold to these old denizens of the desert land.

It was some 25 years ago that a teamster started from Tonopah to the then boom camp of Greenwater down in Death Valley; his wagon was loaded with sixteen barrels of a produce that the late Robert Ingersol described in one of his classical productions as "the mingled souls of wheat and corn."

The trail led past what is known as "Moving Mountain," an immense and towering pile of sand that is ever shaking and trembling like some desert geranium in the breezes that sweep across the sage-covered flats. During some high wind many tons of the sand are often dislodged from the peak of this freakish mountain and come tumbling down its sides like a snow slide.

As the unlucky teamster approached Moving Mountain a storm came up accompanied by a terrific wind; looking up he could see the top of the mountain beginning to topple. Hurriedly he unhitched his string of mules and got away from the avalanche of sand by a narrow margin. But his "precious" cargo was buried under a thousand tons of sand. It is there to-day, growing more valuable every year. Many have tried to unearth this buried treasure but without success. The pile of sand has shifted so many times during the years that no one to-day knows where to start digging. As one old prospector remarked, "It is like trying to find a needle lost in a haystack."



Trail's End

It's time for another Pin Money Circle prize. This one is for the month of March and it goes to Donald Briggs of Chicago, Ill. He sent in the largest number of subscriptions during March; and believe me, folks, it was a good big number.

To Donald we are giving an autographed photograph of his favorite movie actor or actress. He will also receive a handsome enlargement of a snapshot of himself, as did the winner of the February prize.

Here's a letter we received from one of our members. He makes a suggestion to you all, that, while interesting, would be very difficult to carry out. And although we feel that we perhaps cannot take up his idea right now, nevertheless it shows the vital interest taken in Trail's End by the writer of the letter.

We feel sure that the rest of you share this interest and therefore would like to hear what this fellow member has to say.

Dear Editor:

As a member of the Trail's End Club, I think it would be very appropriate if all of our members, or all possible, could get together some place, sometime during the year, so that we all could get better acquainted and establish that get-together feeling.

As for myself, I don't think it would be entirely impossible, for, in a sense, we're wanderers, are we not? At least, I've been a wanderer. I have been in nearly every state, and Mexico and Canada. I'm an ex-college student, ex-cowpuncher, salesman and many other things. At present I am farming nearly 1,000 acres here in Nebraska. I'm not quite twenty-two years old, but I believe I've had my share of hard knocks.

I'd like to have this printed on the Trail's End Club page, and would like to hear from every member of the club and get their ideas and also establish correspondence with them.

Sincerely,

CARL B. COTTINGHAM.

Culbertson, Nebr.

Some Fellow Members

The names of these members appear on page 78.

Join Trail's End.

# of Trail's End

The names of these members appear on page 78.

See Page 66.

OUR AIR MAIL is running daily between the editorial office of RANCH ROMANCES and its readers throughout the world. The Editor wishes to establish a definite understanding with every reader and be in a position to know what you want and why. RANCH ROMANCES is not published for anyone but the reader, and we want you to look upon this magazine as something distinctly your own. Take a personal interest in its future. Write and tell us exactly the kind of story that you think ought to go into it. And we want to help make friends for our readers. We want to help you to know friends who are thousands of miles away or within a stone's throw of your own town. OUR AIR MAIL will be glad to forward and exchange letters. The Editor reserves the right to read and turn over to the Postal Authorities, if necessary, anything that is not in keeping with the clean, outdoor spirit of RANCH ROMANCES. Be sure to enclose postage for letters sent by OUR AIR MAIL.

MARION LIKES R. R.

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to gain admittance to Our Air Mail corner. I certainly do hope I am successful this time.

I have brown, wavy hair and gray eyes, and am interested in aviation. But the nearest I can get to being an aviatrix is being a private secretary, so that is what I am learning.

I would like to hear from both sexes, and will exchange snaps. I promise to answer all letters received.

I have been reading R. R. mag. for some time now and think the stories are so interesting.

Best of luck to you and the mag.

MARION SYMOND.

785 Line St., Camden, N. J.

HE'S ATHLETIC

Dear Editor:

Well, I am back again. This is my second or third attempt to get pen pals. I am going to keep on trying, though.

Won't some of you folks take pity on a poor lonesome boy and make him not so lonesome? I have brown hair and blue eyes and am 22 years old. I am a football and basket ball player with high school and college records.

I am sure I can write you some real interesting letters if you will give me a chance. So come all ye of either sex and give me, a steadfast reader of R. R., both barrels.

WHIZZLE DE BANGO.

Wayne Price,
Box 33, St. Paul, Indiana.

A TRAIL'S END MEMBER

Dear Editor:

This is my second plea for pen pals. Last time I received a card. This time I hope to see my letter in Our Air Mail.

I am a constant reader of R. R. I am sending in my coupon, so that I too will belong to your Trail's End Club.

Will answer all letters and exchange snapshots with those who care to. Here's a description of myself: I am twenty-two, blond, blue-gray eyes, and am fond of all sports. Have a particular pen for bowling and skating. But this is getting lengthy, so I'll close with best wishes to R. R. and its editor.

Sincerely yours,

BLONDY.

Chas. Mills,
327 Douglas St.,
Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., Canada.

LET'S GO!

Dear Editor:

This is my second letter pleading for pen pals and I hope I see it in print. There is no mag. on the market that can beat R. R. I can hardly wait for the next issue. I am looking for pen pals, so come on, boys and girls, and write to a lonesome reader.

STAN OF TOLEDO.

Stanley Landry,
3703 Watson Ave., Toledo, Ohio.

SHE LOVES HER R. R.

Dear Editor:

Here I am again, asking help from the Air Mail. Could you just give me a little place in your great book, R. R.? I sure enjoy it in the evening. I get my chair in front of the radio, then my R. R., and I am at rest with the world. I am an old married woman. My husband was in the navy from 1915 until 1922, so if anyone remembers Spike, or Dick, Hiller, write. He was killed last year. I also would like to hear from anyone else. I am 30 years old, have brown hair and blue eyes.

MRS. ETHEL HILLER.

2614 E. 79th St., Chicago, Ill.

CURLY HAIR AND BLUE EYES

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to enter into Our Air Mail department and I hope you will not turn me away again.

I've been a reader of your magazine for over two years and sure enjoy it. It can't be beaten.

Guess I had better tell you something about myself. I'm a girl of 19 years, with brown curly hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion.

Now, come on, all you soldiers, sailors, cowboys, cowgirls, and write to me. Will answer all letters pronto.

Wishing the Ranch Romances lots of success.

CURLY OF INDIANA.

Virginia Summer,
1802 McCormick Ave.,
Washington, Ind.

PALS, WHERE ARE YOU?

Dear Editor:

I have written before but have not had any pen pals.

Am a girl of 24 and lonesome for pen pals, and I think that the Ranch Romances magazine has as good stories as I ever read anywhere. I sure hope you will find space enough in your Air Mail pages to print this.

Hoping to hear from some pen pals soon,

MISS LULA TUTTLE.

856 West Lake St., Ogden, Utah.

MAIL

WHAT ABOUT THIS?

Dear Editor:

This is our second letter to you and would like to have it printed as soon as possible.

We think the Ranch Romances absolutely can't be beaten. We would like to have pen pals from anywhere. We're inclined to prefer boys—nothing unusual about that, is there?

We are 17 and 18 years of age, both seniors of M. H. S.

TWO ARDENT READERS OF R. R.

Miss Portia Sears,
Box 241, Madison, Kansas.
Miss Kathryn Horn,
R. R. 1, Madison, Kansas.

LONELY DOLORES

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to get in the Air Mail, and I still think R. R. is the best ever. I have read many other mags., but I've made up my mind to stick to R. R. I do hope you will not burn my letter this time as I sure would love to have some pen pals. I am very lonely and would appreciate all letters received.

I would especially like to hear from persons who could give me information concerning South America, Spain, Mexico and Arizona. I'd love to hear from anyone living there. Others may write also, and I assure everyone I'll try my best to be a true pen pal.

Oh, I almost forgot to describe myself. I am a girl 18 years of age and have brown hair and brown eyes.

I am interested in all sports and am very fond of animals.

Wishing R. R. and everyone the best of luck ever, I will close hoping someone will write to

LONELY DOLORES.

c/o Our Air Mail.

LET'S HAVE THOSE LETTERS!

Dear Editor:

As a member of Trail's End I feel as though I should have a chance to get some pen pals for my buddy and I, so bring them on, please. We are just a pair of tired wanderers, but we are not too tired to write to pen pals. My buddy is free, white, and of age, while I'm 6 ft. 2 in. tall, an ex-pug., and weigh 182 lbs.; also free, white, and twenty-one, so come on, let's have 'em.

We remain,
JACK and BUCK.

Jack Conway,
Lester Fales,
885 Grandville Ave.,
Grand Rapids, Mich.

NO PALS SO FAR

Dear Editor:

I have written before, but this time I am writing for pen pals and to say I am sorry, but most of them don't answer. I will answer all who write if it takes me a year.

I am a young girl of twenty with brown hair and brown eyes. So all grab pen, paper and write.

"ED."

c/o Our Air Mail.

HOW'S THIS, GIRLS?

Dear Editor:

Just a few lines from a lonely "Virginia Rambler."

I've been a constant reader of Ranch Romances for the past four years. As soon as I get it I start with the first story and read every story in each, from cover to cover. It is the best magazine I've ever read.

I've written to about a dozen of our Air Mail writers, but so far haven't received any answers. Won't someone please write to me? I'll be sure to answer every letter.

I am a young man, twenty-seven years old, six feet tall, light brown hair and gray eyes. Have been in about thirty foreign countries and about twenty states in the U. S. At present am a construction boss in New York. Have been here about two months and haven't met a single girl, so am awful lonesome. Am a Virginian and love the South. I'll answer every letter I receive.

Best wishes to R. R. and all its readers.

"THE VIRGINIA RAMBLER."

L. S. Spencer,
435 Clermont Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

HE HAS AN ADVENTUROUS DISPOSITION

Dear Editor:

Yip-yip-yip-ee-e! Whoa there, Tony, ole horse! Calm down while I say a few words of greeting to the Air Mail gang!

Howdy folks! I'm hailing you all from the Wasatch Ranges in northern Utah. Each summer finds me riding and camping through these wondrous beauty spots of Utah. Yes indeed, folks, it's a wonderful country, this glorious old West of ours!

I'm a Westerner and proud of it. I'm a young fellow, have dark hair and dark eyes, and have an adventurous disposition. I'm also a hearty booster for the R. R. magazine and always shall be. I enjoyed the "Brand Fires of Barman" and "The Slow Poke." I think this mag. has a wonderful assortment of stories. It helps pass many a lonely evening around the camp fire. A large bunch of pen pals would also help out wonderfully!

Well, folks, I'll bid you all adios and ride on down the "Utah Trail." Hoping I hear from many of the Air Mail gang real pronto.

THE UTAH RANGER.

C. B. Johnson, Kaysville, Utah.

THEY'RE AIRMEN IN INDIA

Dear Editor:

I have heard from a number of the fellows on this camp of the huge success of their letters for pen pals which you have so kindly inserted in your magazine, so I am asking you if you would do the same favor for me.

I may add that even in this country, so far from the U. S. A., Ranch Romances is extremely popular and is eagerly read.

My pal and I, two lonely airmen, desire pen pals, both sexes. Will answer all letters.

CHARLES EDWARD JOHNSON.
ERIC JOHN FULLER.

Stores Depot Section,
Aircraft Depot, Drigh Road,
Karachi, India.

ANSWERS CAME FROM EVERYWHERE

Dear Editor:

Many thanks for printing my plea for pen pals. I've already received about 300 replies, and I only expected 20! The majority were from American boys and girls; the rest were composed of Canadians, English, Dutch, Swedes and Hungarians!

But, after all, one's nationality isn't so terribly important, is it? If you can "play straight" and "play the game," that's what counts, and I hope that someone among those I've answered will prove a real pal, for someone like that is worth bags of letter acquaintances.

Still, I'm sorry that I couldn't acknowledge every letter I got, they were so nice, but it's impossible, as I lost my job recently. Loads of thanks, all of you who answered my wee letter and every success to R. R. and the Air Mail.

VIOLET ALSTON.

c/o Martin,
291a Parliamentary Road,
Glasgow, Scotland.

KEEP HER BUSY!

Dear Editor:

This is the second time I've written to you since I started buying Ranch Romances. It's one magazine I haven't grown tired of reading.

May I join Our Air Mail? I'd like to have correspondents from all over. Here's a girl who prefers gentlemen with blond hair. Let me hear from them. I have brown hair and brown eyes, am 18 years old, and interested in almost everything.

Please, folks, don't let my mail box grow rusty. Good luck to R. R. and its editor.

WANDERLUSTER.

Jeanne Riddell,
917 College St., Los Angeles, Calif.

WOULD ADMIRE TO HEAR FROM WEST

Dear Editor:

How's chances of getting in touch with the gang? This is the third time I am writing.

Received my pin a few weeks ago and sure like it. I am a young city girl, dark-haired and dark-eyed. Sometimes my eyes are black, and sometimes brown. My complexion is fair. Would admire hearing from ranch folks, especially from Arizona, Wyoming, Montana and Colorado.

I hope my letter finds at least the last corner of the Air Mail.

A Club Member,
"BLACKIE."

Emeline D. Zelinske,
932 W. 52nd St., Chicago, Ill.

MARJORIE IS HOPING

Dear Editor:

This is my second plea for pen pals. Hope I get a break this time.

I am a member of Trail's End Club and a regular reader of Ranch Romances.

I am a stranger here. I keep house for my father, my only relative, so you know I've lots of time to write.

I am 17 years young, have black hair, blue eyes, and turned up nose.

I love sports, dancing and reading good books.

I would love to hear from cowboys, sailors, mounties and anyone loving the outdoors.

Three cheers for R. R. and its editor.

With hopes,
MARJORIE K. DUNCAN.

General Delivery, Peoria, Ill.

HAD 300 LETTERS!

Dear Editor:

Well, gang, here I come again, but not for pen pals this time.

I have received so many letters that I can't possibly answer them all. In fact I received about 300 letters in all.

Please, Editor, print this letter, because I want all of those good people that wrote to me to know that I appreciate their kindness in writing. I will answer as many as I can.

AN R. R. ADMIRER.

Rudy Rice,
Box 238, Brookline, Mass.

YOU'LL GET AN ANSWER

Dear Editor:

This is my third attempt to get a letter in Our Air Mail, so please don't disappoint me this time.

I've been reading Ranch Romances for over a year and also I'm a member of Trail's End. I think it's the best magazine there is, as most everyone else does.

Here is my request: I'm lonely, ever so lonely, so won't some of you readers write to poor little me? Everybody from everywhere, you'll get an answer.

Here is something about myself. I'm 19 years old, brown hair, brown eyes, and am a boy.

Yours sincerely,
"LONESOME."

Raymond Harter,
R. F. D. 1, Smokey Road,
Lockbourne, Ohio.
P. S.—I forgot to say, but I've got one swell pen pal.

WON'T YOU PLEASE?

Dear Editor:

This is my second letter to you. Won't you please have a heart and publish it? I want to hear from everyone any place. I am a lonely girl of 16 years, have dark brown hair and brown eyes. I love to dance, hike, skate, play baseball—well, really I love all sports.

I have been reading the R. R. for about two years. I think it is the best mag. out. It contains clean, interesting stories. I am sure anyone that reads it enjoys it.

An R. R. Booster,
NINA.

Nina Washeck,
6705 Ave. O, Houston, Texas.

S. O. S.

Dear Editor:

Here we are again, two sturdy readers of Ranch Romances, and this is our second attempt to join Our Air Mail. We're hoping you'll try and squeeze us in a little space this time. We're both brunettes. Come on, one and all, we're waiting.

ANN and BETTY CARTER.

490 Charles Street,
Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., Canada.

WHOOPEE!

Dear Editor:

Again I attempt to crash the gate of your Air Mail. Being a faithful reader of Ranch Romances I really think you ought to give me a break.

I am anxious to meet some pen pals and I always answer all letters as soon as I receive them.

I live in the most beautiful state in the world and work in the city of Hollywood. I have some lovely snapshots, I will be glad to send to pals, and can tell much that will be sure to interest your readers.

Have punched cattle, time clocks, and opponents. Have sailed all the seas except the sea of matrimony and have been shipwrecked. Have brown eyes, brown hair, a sense of humor and am a lover of music, art, nature, speed and life.

If this is not enough I will have to bombard you with another letter, so be reasonable—make it easy on yourself.

Au revoir,
AL RICHARDS.

Box 29,
West Los Angeles, Calif.

BROWN EYES HAS PEP

Dear Editor:

Gee, this is my second letter to Our Air Mail. Please, Editor, have a heart and print this one so I can get some pen pals. I live on a farm and like to write letters. Come on, boys and girls, grab your pens and pencils and shoot some letters this way.

I am seventeen years old, have black hair, brown eyes and lots of pep. I would especially like to hear from cowboys, cowgirls, and rangers. I will try my best to answer all letters and will also exchange snaps. R. R. is a wonderful magazine and I wish it success in the years to come.

Yours sincerely,
ELSIE TEAL.

R. 1, Box 30.
Flandreau, So. Dakota.

FOR GOOD-LOOKING BOYS ONLY

Dear Editor:

This is my second letter to the Air Mail Dept. and I am waiting at the end of the road to see it in print.

I want nice dark boys between the ages of 21 and 23 to write to me. I prefer boys in sunny Tennessee, Oklahoma, or Colorado to write to me. Please, boys, give me a break. I have auburn curly hair and brown eyes and wear those long dresses, too. Am 19 at present and have taught dancing.

Have read the R. R. for a year and think the stories are so clean and interesting. Again may I say will you good-looking boys in those states send me a special delivery letter?

IRISH TOMMY.

Ethelyn Riley,
531 Barrow St., Moberly, Mo.

WANTS TO HEAR ABOUT THE WEST

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to get a letter printed in Ranch Romances, and I sure hope I have better success this time than I did the first time. I have read Ranch Romances for quite a while and can really say that I think the stories are good and clean, also very interesting, although I will confess I read Our Air Mail first.

Now, dear editor, I wish you would please print my letter, as I want some real pen pals awfully badly. I want to hear about different places in the West and South in regard to working conditions for girls. I am thinking seriously of looking for a position in other parts. Would like pen pals to write to. So please help me out. Would like to hear from anyone near my own age, which is between 30 and 40. Have dark brown hair and dark eyes, medium complexion. Am awfully interested in aviation, music, and ranches, where I would love to spend a summer vacation. Now, won't some of you lonely, sincere pen pals write to

LONESOME.

c/o Our Air Mail.

EYES OF BLUE

Dear Editor:

This makes my second attempt to get my letter printed in your magazine.

I'm a constant reader of your mag. and I think it is the best ever. In fact have just joined your Trail's End Club.

I'm a lonely California girl and want a box full of letters. I will answer all letters as soon as possible. If you don't get an answer right away just keep looking for it, because it's coming. I promise and I never break a promise.

There, does that please you? I just knew it would.

Oh yes! a description—eyes of blue, 16 years old, and my temper just goes with my dark red hair (curly). I like all sorts of outdoor sports.

My favorite hobby is writing letters. Wishing the Double R. magazine barrels of success, I thank you, editor. I just knew you would publish this letter.

I remain,

BOBBY.

Maryan Squire,
Box 52, Stratford, Calif.

A SOLDIER LAD

Dear Editor:

This is the second time I have tried to join the Air Mail, but if I do not see this in print, it will not be the last, as I want pen pals galore, the more the better, and I will promise to answer each and every one of them.

I am 21 years young and have brown eyes and dark wavy hair and want to hear from boys and girls any age, anywhere. I have done quite a lot of traveling and maybe I could tell you some interesting things.

Oh! I almost forgot to tell you I am a soldier boy in this man's army, but let's hope that doesn't make any differenee, as a soldier gets very lonely sometimes. Here's hoping I see this in print, and wishing the best mag. in the world continued success.

A SOLDIER LAD.

Charles F. Skinner,
U. S. A. M. P. Ord.,
Ft. Dupont, Del.

DON'T FORGET POLLY

Dear Editor:

This is the second time I have written within the last five weeks and I am hoping to see this letter in print. I realize, of course, the length of time it takes to publish requests in Ranch Romances, so don't think I am impatient.

I am tall, have brown hair and blue eyes. I am in my late teens.

Last year I wrote to Ranch Romances and I got quite a few letters but not enough to quench my thirst for more.

Come on, all you pen pushers. When you start to exercise the postman don't forget

POLLY FORAN.

54 Carey Ave., Chelsea, Mass.

TWO TALL FELLOWS

Dear Editor:

This is our second attempt to crash the gates of Our Air Mail, and hope we have better luck this time.

You see we are really after pen pals and plenty of them. So, Miss Editor, won't you publish this letter and help us out? Please.

Maybe we should try to describe ourselves. Here goes: I (Bob) am 6 feet tall, blue eyes, brown curly hair and fair complexion. Charlie is 6 feet tall, with brown eyes and dark hair and fair complexion.

So come on, all you lonesome girls and fellows, and write to a couple of lonely Lancastrians. We will answer all letters as soon as we can and also swap snapshots.

Wishing the R. R. the best of luck we remain,

BOB and CHARLIE.

Charles Keller,
933 N. Lime St., Lancaster, Pa.
R. W. Weichel,
Girard Ave., W. Lancaster, Pa.

HOW ABOUT IT, FOLKS?

Dear Editor:

This is my second plea for pen pals. I have read your magazine for the last two years, and I have enjoyed them immensely. Now, I think all who read my letter will have the same impression of Ranch Romances; that it is the best magazine in the world. How about it, folks?

I want people from all over the world to correspond with a lonesome girl of Chicago. It's very lonesome here, and maybe you pen pals will give me a break.

I am a girl of seventeen years of age, with medium blond hair, blue eyes, one dimple, and my hobby is to write letters.

So come on, all you fellows, and write to me. I hope someone will read my letter and answer my plea for pen pals.

LONESOME EILEEN.

Miss Eileen Donovan,
4445 N. Whipple St., Chicago, Ill.

"CURLY" WANTS PALS

Dear Editor:

I don't suppose my first letter will appear in print, but that doesn't keep me from writing. I have read your wonderful magazine for several years and think it the cleanest and most interesting magazine on sale.

First I will tell you a little about myself. I am a nurse (and proud of it), have light curly hair and gray eyes, and also 18 years of age. I love all outdoor sports and am especially fond of dancing.

Now here is my question—I think a nurse might have pen pals, too—don't you? I just love to write to people and know their likes and dislikes, so I hope someone will answer.

Hoping you find space for my humble letter.

Toodle Loo,

CURLY.

Munroe Memorial Hospital,
Ocala, Fla.

R. R. IS FULL OF THRILLS

Dear Editor:

Well, I am not so easily discouraged that I won't try again to get my letter published in Our Air Mail column. I think Ranch Romances has the most thrilling stories of ranch life and I am always anxious for the next number to arrive.

Your Air Mail pages are most interesting as they give one the opportunity of learning about the different types of persons and their favorite recreations and pastimes. This not only broadens our views on the study of human nature but also gives us a chance to increase the number of our friends.

I live in the country near a small town where I am employed as a bookkeeper, stenog. and general office clerk. After living in the city for about four years I find it rather quiet here in the country, although I must admit I like the country.

Here's hoping someone else who is as lonesome as myself will answer my call for pen pals.

Sincerely,

MISS OLIVE B. NOONAN.

Bel Air, Maryland.

By PROFESSOR MARCUS MARI

GEMINI

JUNE

GEMINI rules until June twenty-first. These people belong mainly to the realms of art, science, and mechanics, but so varied are their tastes that they are seldom satisfied with one occupation or pursuit. They have fine minds, bright, sparkling and witty, but they lack concentration, and, though they have a wide knowledge, it is frequently superficial.

While their minds are quick to devise plans, they require and like advice to help them decide ways and means of carrying them out.

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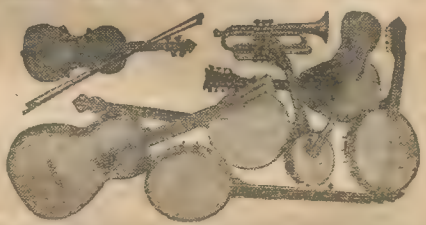

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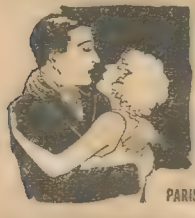

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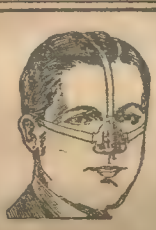

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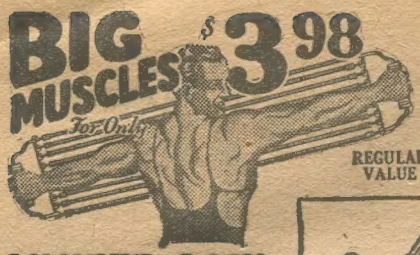

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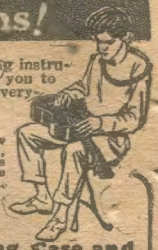

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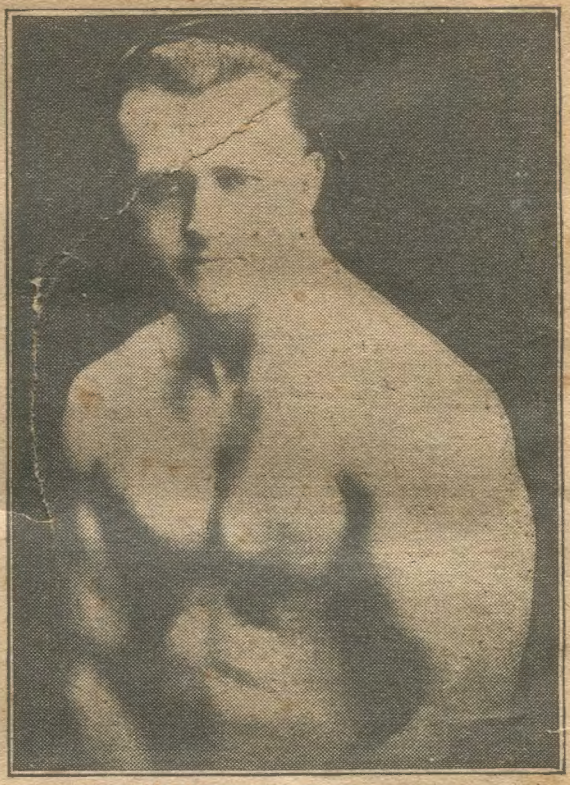

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